

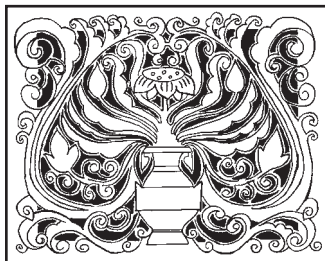


# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

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started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

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Amrita Kalasha

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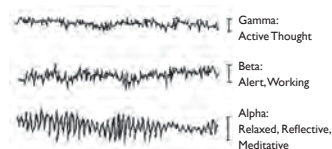
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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## Cintana: Contemplation

January 2007

Vol. 112, No. 1

व्रतेन दीक्षामाप्नोति दीक्षयाऽऽप्नोति दक्षिणाम् ।  
दक्षिणा श्रद्धामाप्नोति श्रद्धया सत्यमाप्यते ॥

By self-dedication one obtains consecration, by consecration one obtains grace; by grace one obtains faith, and by faith is truth obtained.

(Yajur Veda, 19.30)

वि मे कर्णा पतयतो वि चक्षुर्विदं ज्योतिर्हृदय आहित यत् ।  
वि मे मनश्चरति दूरआधीः किं स्विद्वक्ष्यामि किमु नू मनिष्ये ॥

My ears are turned (to hear him), my eyes (to see him); this light that is placed in the heart (seeks to know him); my mind—the receptacle of distant (objects)—hastens (towards him). What shall I declare (him)? How shall I comprehend (him)?

(Rig Veda, 6.9.6)

न संदृशे तिष्ठति रूपमस्य न चक्षुषा पश्यति कश्चनैनम् ।  
हृदा मनीषा मनसाऽभिक्लृप्तो य एतद्विदुरमृतास्ते भवन्ति ॥

His form is not within the field of vision; nobody sees him (this Self) with the eye. He is revealed by the intuition of the higher mind (free from occupation with sense objects), which resides in the heart and controls all thinking. Those who know this become immortal.

(Katha Upanishad, 2.3.9)

यदा विनियतं चित्तमात्मन्येवावतिष्ठते ।  
निःस्पृहः सर्वकामेभ्यो युक्त इत्युच्यते तदा ॥

When the well-controlled mind rests in the Self alone, free from longing for objects, then is one said to have attained yoga. (Bhagavadgita, 6.18)

It is a joy to merge the mind in the Indivisible Brahman through contemplation. And it is also a joy to keep the mind on the Lila, the Relative, without dissolving it in the Absolute

(Sri Ramakrishna)

# TO OUR READERS

We live in a conflict-ridden world where newer and more sinister forms of violence appear by the day. Power and dominance continue to define much of our social interaction—from the interpersonal to the international. If our society is able to maintain its sanity, it is because of people who retain the ability to introspect and think prudently. This uniquely human capacity is at its best in the contemplative, and it is to contemplatives that we need to turn to steer us clear of the numerous conflicts that threaten to pull our society apart. It is for this reason that this inaugural number of the hundred and twelfth volume of *Prabuddha Bharata* focuses

on the diverse facets of ‘The Contemplative Life’ and invites us to reassess our own outlook and actions to improve our personal health and help reduce conflict in society.

This is also time for us to convey our greetings and good wishes to all of you—our readers, contributors, reviewers, advertisers, and well-wishers—who ensure the successful dissemination of the noble and invigorating ideas for which Swami Vivekananda commissioned this journal. As we step into the new year we look forward to your continued help and support in exploring newer vistas and reaching out to our global audience in greater numbers.

## THIS MONTH

A creative imagination and mastery over emotion go into the making of **The Contemplative Mood**. This is the editorial opinion.

In **Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** Brahmachari Gurudas takes us on a visit to Belur Math.

Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurates the number with his personal reflections on **The Contemplative Life**.

Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, provides us practical insights on living a life of **Contemplation in an Active World**.

Spiritual culture and God-centred life and work underpin all activities of the Ramakrishna Order. This tradition has been nurtured by a host of serious contemplatives for over a hundred years. Swami Prabhanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, gives us an illuminating

overview of **The Contemplative Tradition in the Ramakrishna Order**.

The contemplative life is as much a matter of one’s world-view as that of practising specific techniques of contemplation. **All-inclusive View of the Vedic Seers**, by Swami Tattwavidanandaji, Principal, Vivekananda Veda Vidyalaya, Belur Math, presents a glimpse of the Vedic world-view.

**Contemplation on Om, the Gayatri, and the Mahāvākyas**, a part of the ancient Vedic tradition that remains relevant even in modern times, is elucidated by Swami Mukhyanandaji, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order residing at Belur Math.

The numerous contemplative techniques termed *upasanas* and *vidyas* which have been developed in the Upanishads and which culminate in the knowledge of Brahman have been highlighted by Swami Atmajnanandaji, Editor, Viveka Prabha, Mysore, in **Contemplation in the Upanishads**.

**Meditation and the Way of Yoga** is a succinct survey of the the yogic psychophysical techniques aimed at awakening one's higher consciousness by Swami Adiswaranandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, New York.

Swami Gokulanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, New Delhi, takes us through the **Preparations for the Contemplative Life**.

**Japa: Instrument of Love for God's Name** is Swami Tathagatanandaji's explication of a fundamental contemplative technique, Japa. The author is Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society, New York.

Swami Amaranandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Centre Vedantique, Geneva, discusses the forms, facets, and role of **Prayer in Contemplative Life**.

Swami Sarvadevanandaji, Assistant Minister, Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood, surveys the ritual traditions of various religions to underscore the mutuality of **Worship and Contemplation**.

**Meditation and Reflection on the Divine Play: *Lila Chintana* and *Lila Dhyana*** provide natural ways for developing one's inner life, suggests Swami Atmajnananandaji, of the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C.

The spiritual life has been likened to walking on the razor's edge. Swami Brahmeshanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh, takes a look at the **Obstacles in Contemplative Life** as well as the recommended remedies.

**Fruits of Contemplation: Some Reflections** on the powers released and changes wrought by contemplation is authored by Swami Bhaskaranandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of Western Washington, Seattle.

The diverse streams of **The Vaiṣṇava Contemplative Tradition** have been examined by Swami Purnanandaji, of Ramakrishna Math, Belur, while Swami Vimalatmanandaji, also of Belur Math, and

Swami Tadanandaji of the Vedanta Centre of Sydney review **The Śākta Contemplative Tradition** and **Contemplative Practices in Śaivism**.

Acharya Mahaprajnaji, Head, Terapanth Jain Vishva Bharati, Ladnun, brings his scholarly insight to bear upon **The Jain Contemplative Tradition**, and its vital place in the Indian way of life.

**Contemplating the Theravada Tradition** is a lucid introductory narrative by Ajahn Amaro of the Abhayagiri Monastery, Redwood Valley, California.

**The Heart of Mahayana Buddhist Practice in the West** is a personal account of the values and practices of Mahayana Buddhism by Rev. Heng Sure of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, Berkeley.

**Knowledge, Love, and Union: A Glimpse into the Christian Contemplative Tradition** is provided by Father Paul of Jesus. He teaches advanced theological French in the Divinity School at Harvard University, Cambridge.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Founder, Centre for Peace and Spirituality, New Delhi, shares his thoughts on **Contemplative Spirituality in Islam**.

Smt. Vimala Thakar, who has lived a rich life of contemplation and action, has sent us **Some Thoughts on the Contemplative Life** from Shiv Kuti, Mount Abu.

The scientific section of this number comprises of **The Contemplative Mind** by Prof. Somnath Bhat-tacharyya, former Head, Department of Psychology, University of Calcutta; **The Neurophysiological and Psychoneural Aspects of Meditative Practices** by Dr S Sulekha, Dr P N Ravindra, Dr T R Raju, and Dr Bindu Kutty of the Department of Neurophysiology, National Institute of Mental health and Neurological Sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore; and **The Contemplative Life and Psychopathology** by Dr Alan Roland, a practising psychoanalyst from New York City.

# The Contemplative Mood

THE Vedas conjure up in our minds visions of seers immersed in contemplation, of rishis engaged in fire-sacrifices, of priests filling the air with their melodious chants, and of teachers expounding the knowledge of Brahman to eager students. Men and women intermingling freely with devas and devis, with yakshas, gandharvas, and other celestial beings crowd our imagination when we attempt a glimpse into the Vedic realm.

The Vedas are the repository of supersensory knowledge, so our vision of the Vedic world is not likely to be dominated by the commonplace. But this imagined world is also a distant entity, difficult to reify in contemporary circumstances. For we live in a world from which gods and angels seem to have been exorcised as much as ghosts, wherein the *supersensory* has become synonymous with the *imaginary*.

### The Power of Imagination

Imagining the real and realizing the imagined are central to the contemplative process. Imagination powers all creativity. Even the mundane tasks of daily living, when carried out imaginatively, turn into creative acts. It is imagination that results in the insights that lead to scientific discovery, the production of artistic masterpieces, revolutions in religious and social life, and daring displays of sporting brilliance. It is imagination again, when turned morbid, that results in unimaginable acts of cruelty and violence. Imagination clearly has both a life and a power of its own.

Imagination involves the formation of mental images and associations that are not directly or immediately available to the senses. Normally

our thought world is being constantly bombarded by such images and associations derived from the subconscious mind. In his commentary on the *Yoga Sutra*, Maharshi Vyasa cites seven ‘unperceived’ (*aparidrṣṭa*) functions of the mind, which essentially delineate the way the subconscious mind functions: ‘*Nirodhadharmaśaṁskārāḥ pariṇāmo’tha jīvanam, ceṣṭā śaktiśca cittasya dharmā darśanavarjitāḥ*; Suppression (of thoughts or mental modifications), seeds of action and memory traces (loosely called *śaṁskāra*), (internal) transformation, life (movement of prana), activity (which makes the senses function), and (psychic) powers constitute the unseen or subconscious characteristics of the mind.’ *Vāsanās* or memory traces are responsible for the images that keep flitting across our minds. Often these tend to coalesce into vivid associations—our fancies and fantasies. But they take a more concrete shape when they rouse up and get linked to *karmaśaṁskāras* (more commonly termed *karmāṣaya*), the residues of previous actions (our *habits*) impelling us to act on our fantasies.

The mind also has its conscious (*paridrṣṭa*) component (and this alone is what we are aware of) which can choose to structure or guide the *vyrttis* (mental modifications) sprouting from the unconscious, giving them direction and coherence. And this is what we call imaginative thinking.

The unconscious is not, however, merely a seething cauldron of dark desires and passions as we often imagine it to be. Being the seat of prana (life-force) as well as *ceṣṭā* and *śakti* (the mental forces), it is the repository of all our powers—the dynamo that drives all psychophysical activity. And it is for us to choose how we channelize and utilize this power.

If our imaginings are derived from the unconscious, it is our beliefs and imaginations that in turn structure the unconscious. This is because our beliefs determine the way we act, and it is repeated action that forms habits. The workings of the subconscious are usually represented in our mind as images (termed primary process) in contrast to the more elaborate rational and language-dependent secondary process of the conscious mind. The images we send down into our subconscious therefore determine the way the subconscious powers our actions.

The subconscious is also not a closed personal chamber. The element of *śakti* (psychic power) structured into the subconscious enables it to tune itself to other psyches as well as to the natural intelligence inherent in the cosmos. More importantly, the subconscious has the ability to hold itself in abeyance—a capacity termed *nirodha*—which allows the light of the superconscious to shine freely through our being. Images (and sound symbols) again are what help us tap these powers. It is for this reason that successful contemplation is also successful imagination.

The Vedic world was no less human than the world of today. But even the best historical efforts to reconstruct this distant world are likely to border on the imaginary. The vision captured in the Vedas, however, is there for each one of us to recreate in our imagination and realize in the depths of our being. This realization depends as much on the knowledge of our own selves as on the knowledge of the Vedas.

### Emotional Solitude

The creative imagination that opens the doors to the superconscious is no ordinary imagination. It requires that the instinctual forces of the *samskaras* be attenuated and greater control be obtained over mental processes. The prime requirement for this attenuation of *samskaras* is isolation from emotional surges, for it is these surges of attachment, hatred, and selfishness (technically termed *kleśas*) that give life to the *samskaras*. This ‘emotional solitude’ is

therefore a prerequisite for the contemplative life. It is also termed *brahmacharya*—‘the ideal of the life of the student, with its mingling of solitude, austerity, and intense concentration of thought’.

A true contemplative, by the very virtue of *brahmacharya*, is also a student. And it is Goddess Saraswati who is the deity of the student. Sister Nivedita points out that Swami Vivekananda believed this ‘worship of Saraswati—by which he meant perfect emotional solitude and self-restraint’, was ‘an essential preparation for any task demanding the highest powers, whether of heart, mind, or body. Such worship had been recognized in India for ages as part of the training of the athlete, and the significance of this fact was that a man must dedicate all the force at his disposal, if he were now and again to reach that height of superconscious insight, which appears to others as illumination, inspiration, or transcendental skill. Such illumination was as necessary to the highest work in art or science, as in religion.’

Is *brahmacharya* then some sort of self-deprivation or emotional drought, or an antisocial attitude? Our emotions, after all, are an integral part of our being, and form the very basis of social interaction. And if we are to believe Sigmund Freud, ‘to love and to work’ is the ultimate the human being can hope for.

In the company of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita recalls, ‘it was impossible to think with respect of a love that sought to *use*, to appropriate, to bend to its own pleasure or good, the thing loved. Instead of this, love, to be love at all, must be a willing benediction, a free gift, “without a reason”, and careless of return. This was what he meant, by his constant talk of “loving without attachment”’. ‘Love is always a manifestation of bliss,’ Swamiji said in England, ‘the least shadow of pain falling upon it, is always a sign of physicality and selfishness.’

It is this physicality and selfishness that the contemplative wishes to transcend. It is *brahmacharya*, therefore, that sets the mood for effective contemplation.





# Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

## *A Visit to the Belur Math: January 1907*

After having been connected with the Ramakrishna Mission work in America, for the last eight years, it is quite a new experience to find myself in India, an inmate of the Belur Math, the headquarters, from whence all the workers of this great Mission go forth. ...

As a rule, the monks or Sannyasins in India do not have a fixed place where they reside or are taken care of. The monk in the West, in a certain sense exchanges one home for another. Entering the monastery he is provided for during the rest of his life. But when in India one becomes a Sannyasin, he henceforth begs his food from door to door and he wanders from village to village, resting under shelter or in the open air, as chance may be. And he is cared for only in this sense, that no true Hindu householder, be he ever so poor, will refuse to share his meal, with the religious mendicant.

Such then was the life of the Swamis belonging to the Ramakrishna Mission, before the Math had been established. But the time came, when their activity should be directed in a different way. Called by their leader to a life of combined action, a nucleus had to be formed and a place to be built where they might meet and prepare themselves for the task before them. The Math was erected and provisions were made for those who wish to live a retired life, as well as for the workers. Room was also provided for Brahmacharis or neophytes who assist the Swamis in their work and who receive from them, spiritual instructions.

It is not strange that we find the life here different from what we picture monastic life in the West. There is much that is good and holy and praiseworthy in all places where sincere men live

together, and monasteries at all times and in all places have served to give men an opportunity to approach their God under less difficult conditions, than they would have found elsewhere. But with the thought of loftiness and sublimity there is much in the word monastery that hints at gloom and depression; emaciated features, hushed voices, noiseless movements and severity everywhere. There is very little of that in the Belur Math. Failure, disappointment or fear of future punishment are not the motives which prompt the Hindu monk to join the holy order. In the West we so often find this to be the case. And the life of austerity and self-denial, instead of bringing freedom to the soul, often creates a being centred in the little self, with a heart devoid of sweetness, mellowness and simplicity.

In the East it is different. The attempt is not being made to make the imperfect perfect, but by a dwelling in the Divine, a drawing away from the imperfect is brought about; by bringing in the Light, darkness leaves of its own accord; by filling the mind with the sublime, there is no room for what is low. A remembrance of the real Self, makes [one] forgetful of the little self. A very different process! The heart expands, it includes all, it is filled with love for all that lives. There is no room then for pessimism and morosity in the monastic life here. We find the massive building, white walls and cement floors and extreme simplicity everywhere. But the rooms are full of light and air; no seclusion in little cells, but everything open and free. The inmates hold one common object, one common purpose and we find very little of "mine and thine" amongst them. The association between them is much as we like to see



it amongst brothers; easy, free from unnecessary ceremonies and still an appreciation of the good qualities in each one. The Brahmacharis, mostly young lads, serve the older Sannyasins in many little ways. But one is not impressed with the idea of servility. It comes so natural with them, so spontaneous. In their obedience there is no questioning. They love the Swamis, they admire them and that is expressed in their actions. To live with the Swamis is a privilege, which they appreciate.

To describe the life of the monks here, can be done in a few words. Having realized the divinity within, knowing themselves to be the witness of all that takes place, knowing the mind and the body to act, while the true Self never acts, they offer up whatever is connected with their external and mental life, to the Lord of all and they serve Him through His manifestations in the whole of humanity. In other words, their life has become a life of service, in whatever form that may be. When living in the Math, they may do such work as has to be done there. When called elsewhere, they may answer such call, be it to nurse the sick, bring food to the famine-stricken, instruct those who ask for spiritual advice, give shelter to the destitute, or bring to other nations the glorious teaching of Vedanta of which they stand so much in need. And all this is done without any personal considerations. The question will be discussed whether or not, the help is needed. This being decided in the affirmative, the person best fitted for the work will be selected and then, without further questioning or delay, the work is executed.

Understanding the life of the Sannyasin, we will then not be disappointed to find their life devoid of much external show of religious sentiment as far as ceremonies are concerned. Religion is to be practised every moment of the day, never to leave our life, no matter in what way we may be occupied. During eating or working or resting or play, nay even during sleep the mind should be fixed on God. Such is the teaching. We need therefore not mistake the cheerful countenance and hearty laugh for a worldly state of mind.

Still, when external practices and means are helpful to bring about the realization of one's ideal, such means are not rejected. And an opportunity to satisfy the devotional yearning of the devotee is found in the little chapel, where a simple ceremony is performed every morning and evening. Some flowers gathered in the garden, are offered to the Deity. But the flowers stand only as a symbol, for every act, every thought. So also the food is put on the altar of the Divine. And here God is worshipped not in a sectarian way, but first of all as that All-pervading, Universal Being and then in His different incarnations. And when the worshipper places one of the flowers on his own heart, he meditates on that same Deity as residing in his heart.

Such then is the life here. There is in it much of grace, much of sweetness; a spirit of gentleness which one meets at all times. How quietly it works, imperceptible, except in its results. A simple, cheerful, holy life—a life of service and devotion, a life of love for God and man.

It is then not strange that many flock to this beautiful place on the Ganges side. In easy reach from Calcutta they spend their hours of leisure in the company of the Swamis. And especially on Sundays we may find little groups of men in conversation or singing those beautiful Bengali hymns full of devotion and feeling.

There may not be so much of austerity here, but there is the constant withdrawing from the little self and a centering in the Divine. And the heart becomes pure and simple and loving. And this is what draws so many to the Belur Math and what fills their hearts with love for the Lord and His holy workers. And they return to their respective duties, strengthened and encouraged and filled with a determination also to reach the goal.

Vedanta stands for freedom and that principle is carried out in the Math. All are welcome, who are sincere. The meanest, the lowest finds a place in the heart of these monks. And never does one call for help in vain.

—*Brahmachari Gurudas*

# The Contemplative Life

Swami Atmasthananda

**S**ADHAN-BHAJAN or spiritual practice—japa, prayer and meditation—should play a very vital role in the lives of all. This is a sure way to peace despite all the hindrances that one has to face in daily life. The usual complaint is that it is very difficult to lead an inward life of sadhana or contemplation amidst the rush and bustle of everyday life. But with earnestness and unshakable determination one is sure to succeed. Sri Ramakrishna has said that a devotee should hold on to the feet of the Lord with the right hand and clear the obstacles of everyday life with the other.

There are two primary obstacles to contemplative life. The first one is posed by personal internal weaknesses. One must have unswerving determination to surmount these. The second one consists of external problems. These we have to keep out, knowing them to be harmful impediments to our goal.

For success in contemplative life, one needs earnestness and regularity. Study of the scriptures, holy company, and quiet living help develop our inner lives. I have clearly seen that all the great swamis of our Order have led a life of contemplation even in the midst of great distractions. They lived this life amidst engagement in service to the Lord through whatever responsibility they were assigned. I have been very fortunate to have come in close contact with some of the very illustrious monks of our Order like the revered Swamis Virajananda, Achalananda, Shantananda, Jagadananda, Madhavananda, Nirvedananda, and Gadadharananda. Their lives have been wonderful. There was always a glow on their faces, and association with them was spiritually very inspiring, assuring one of the priceless value of sadhana.

One thing that is a very great power in all men

of God is unaccountable love. You cannot explain why they love you. They don't ask anything in return. They do not ask that you become a monk or do anything in return. They just love you. This is something very, very wonderful. Whenever



Swami Gadadharananda

I visited Belur Math, I found this to be true. But the first monk to leave a deep impress on me was Swami Gadadharananda.

I was then doing my intermediate at Cotton College, Gauhati. During summer vacation, when I was visiting my home at Dinajpur, I came down with serious malaria with several complications. My father, who was a big Sanskrit pandit and a specialist in the Bhagavata, had gone to deliver a lecture at a function in a nearby school. Swami Gadadharananda was at that time the head of the Dinajpur centre (now in Bangladesh). He happened to meet my father at this function and found him very worried. He enquired about the reason and, on learning about my illness, asked if he could come and see me. My father of course welcomed him. Next I found a monk placing his hand on my head and chest—and to my surprise, and everybody else's, all problems were soon over! He had also spoken in such an affectionate and loving manner that I had at once felt drawn to him. So when I was cured I asked my father who the sannyasin was, and coming to know that he was the head of the nearby Ramakrishna Ashrama, went to meet him one day with some friends.

Swami Gadadharananda was very pleased to see

us. He took us to the shrine there and introduced us to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. He gave us prasada and asked us to come again. So I started frequenting the Ashrama. The swami gave me books like Swami Vivekananda's *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, which I started reading. Knowing that I came from a Brahmin family with the tradition of worship at home, he asked me to do *arati* in the shrine and then also puja, even though I had not had my spiritual initiation as yet. After the *arati* he would ask me to meditate a little before returning home. I was deeply impressed.

In the morning, after *mangalarati*, he used to go out walking on the bank of the Kanchan river. Sometimes he would ask if I would like to go with him. During the walk he would suddenly ask: 'What are you thinking as you are walking? Always think of Him, of God. "*Ho jaye tere nam vasa, ho jaye tere nam vasa*; may your name become my refuge, may your name become my refuge." Whenever you walk here and there, you must mentally think like this.' He would find a nice place to sit by the riverbank, and would soon close his eyes and start meditating. What could I do? Not knowing what meditation was, I started imitating him. He would be very still and appear very happy. I imitated him, and in this process, discovered something happening within.

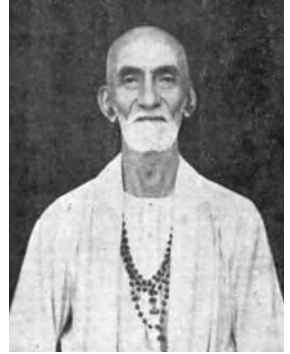
The swami also allowed me to occasionally spend the night at the Ashrama. There were not many rooms there, so he let me stay in his own room. And there I saw something wonderful. Whenever I happened to wake up, at midnight or any other time, I found the swami sitting and meditating! I was amazed! You see how holy company works!

Swami Gadadharananda was nothing short of a saint. I have never seen him hating anyone. He was always ready to serve anybody in need. Even his way of collecting flowers, making garlands, and preparing for the *arati* impressed me. I could not help following him and assisting whenever possible.

As mentioned earlier, even before I met Swami Gadadharananda, I used to do puja at home. Ours was a religious home, and we had a tradition

of *thakur seva* (service to the family deity). In the hostel also I used to do *sandhya-vandana* (daily devotions prescribed by the scriptures) regularly. That, however, was traditional. What I got from the ashrama was something totally different. An ashrama is a place full of spiritual vibrations. That is something inspiring, lively. But in one's home and family, it is a mere traditional way of life, and religious practice, a routine thing; there is not that life there.

Another person who greatly inspired me to take to monastic life was Swami Achalananda, popularly known as Kedar Baba.



*Swami Achalananda*

He was a very austere sadhu. When I first saw him at Belur Math, he was walking about clad only in a *kaupina* (loin cloth). Oh, his regular prayer, japa, and meditation! Even when his health was completely broken, out of twenty-four hours, his rest and other personal activities would take up at most six to eight hours.

I was in close contact with him. He used to come to Belur Math every year for two to three months and stay in the Leggett house, in the room where Holy Mother had lived. Whenever he used to come, I would go and clean his room and serve him a bit. Every day he would ask me to read the *Kathamrita* and would ask me, 'How much japa have you done?'

Once there was a feast at the Math. Next day Kedar Baba asked us how many rasgullas we had eaten. When I said that I had had two, he exclaimed, 'What? Two rasgullas, and that at night! And you want to be a monk and follow Swamiji! Impossible! Those who want to live a pure life must eat a very light meal at night and be careful about sweets.' He was a terrific inspiration.

I was in the Calcutta Students' Home while pursuing my graduate studies, and there I came in close contact with Swami Nirvedananda, a real inspira-

tion in every sense. He emphasized brahmacharya and a God-oriented life, especially for students.

Swami Shantananda was another great contemplative. He was a quiet man and talked very little, but you would always find him doing japa. I think, out of twenty-four hours, he would be doing japa for eighteen to twenty hours. Very sweet and very kind—that was Swami Shantananda. Even when he was down with tuberculosis, there was no change in his routine. When he was asked not to strain himself doing prolonged spiritual practice, he said that he could not do otherwise. And never did he give any external expression to the distress of disease.

Then there was Swami Madhavananda. Though he was the General Secretary, and very active, his life was very regular. He was very strict in matters of principle. But he also knew when to be considerate. Those who live this contemplative life regularly also work better. There is no doubt about it. There is nothing haphazard about their work. Whatever they do they do with all their heart, and as service to God.

Does it work the other way round too? For those who work well, do their inner lives also improve? Well, work alone will not do. The spirit behind the work is important. If you work with the spirit that it is service to God, then that work will be spiritually fruitful. Otherwise, well, everybody works. But their work and the work of a Ramakrishna Order monk is not the same. There are many doctors attending to patients. But there is a



*Swami Nirvedananda*

difference between their work and the service rendered by a monk to the sick. The monk's spirit is that of service to Narayana, God. The other person doesn't necessarily look upon the patient as an embodiment of God or any such thing. 'He is a patient, I give treatment, and I get my fees, that's all'—that is the professional attitude.

For those who have heavy work responsibilities, will the simple maintenance of this attitude of service to God improve their meditative life? Yes! There is no doubt about it. Relief work or hospital work or school work or kitchen work or whatever—it is all His service. That spirit must be there. Then your inner life improves automatically. This is my own personal experience. I have derived tremendous joy from hospital work. I worked at the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama in Rangoon, a busy general hospital. I was also involved in the building of the tuberculosis sanatorium in Ranchi, practically from the beginning. Oh, the joy! And when you worked with devotion, help came from the most unexpected quarters. We had to work hard. But I worked keeping in mind that this was service to the same Being to whom I offered flowers in the shrine. If He came in this shape and form, this was how I had to serve Him. But I also practised japa and meditation every day, irrespective of the time. That is the support one has to hold on to. For everybody that is a *must*, there is no question about that.

There were also occasions when I took time out from work. That time I spent in spiritual practices and scriptural study. I used to go to Swami Jagadananda and study Vedantic texts. Swami Jagadananda was a living embodiment of the spirit of Vedanta. I shall describe the scene of his passing, and from that you can have an understanding of his personality. He had had a heart attack and was gasping for breath. We had brought him to the Vrindaban Sevashrama for treatment. The doctors had declared that there was no hope of recovery and that he would collapse very soon. His legs were turning ice-cold. The doctors asked us to massage the legs with brandy. While I was doing that, he sud-



*Swami Madhavananda*



Swami Jagadananda

Brahman is Absolute Knowledge and Existence! Have you understood that, or not? *Sarvam khalvidam brahma*, all this is verily Brahman. Know and hold on to this!’ And he was gone!

Are the joys of work and that of quiet contemplation and study equivalent? Yes, they are. But both are necessary for harmonious spiritual development.

I had also the opportunity to serve Swami Virajananda, the tenth president of the Order. His life too was very regular, in its own way. And he was very hard-working also. Everything that he did, he did thoroughly—everything! And he was a hard task-master too. He had his hours of deep contemplative moods. And he had a great sense of humour. Sometimes he would prepare some sweets and snacks and send them for the monks after having checked the number—you could not get two! We knew that there would be more in his stock, and that all of it was turning stale. Coming to know what we were thinking, he would remark sarcastically, ‘Rotten! Rotten!’ Then he would do some trick and send those foodstuffs to us; and lo! it was all very good and fresh! He would then ask, ‘Now what are they doing, what are they doing?’

Even at the time of his passing away he retained this sense of humour. The doctors had given up

denly looked at me and exclaimed in his native Sylhet dialect: ‘*Kita karo? Kita karo?* What are you doing? What are you doing?’ ‘Your legs are turning cold, so I am massaging them a little.’ ‘Massaging them a little!’ he retorted.

‘*Satchidekam brahma!*

hope and many sadhus had gathered in his room. When he saw that the sadhus were preparing to chant ‘Hari Om Ramakrishna’ (which is usually done at the final hour) he quipped: ‘*Ekhon na, ekhon na, deri ache*; Not now, not now, there is still time.’ But when the actual time came it was a sight to see: a beaming face, hair standing on end, and tears trickling down from the outer corners of the eyes—all signs of divine joy according to the scriptures.

Can householders also have equally inspiring lives? Yes, they can. Let me recall just one incident, again a parting scene: I heard that a certain devotee was on the verge of death. I went to see him. His wife was massaging his feet. He looked up and, seeing me, said, ‘Bless me, so that I can reach the goal, the feet of the Master.’ He was quiet for some time. Then he looked at his wife and said, ‘Now the moment has come. Put *charanamrit* (holy water) here (in my mouth).’ Having swallowed the *charanamrit* he uttered: ‘Ramakrishna, Ramakrishna.’ And that was the end.

So, both householder life and monastic life can equally be ways of developing oneself spiritually. But one must follow the right route. A monastic life that ends with the taking of *gerua* robes alone is nothing. You have your mantra; you have to make that mantra practically realized in your life. Then alone is your sannyasa worthwhile.

Let me conclude by recalling my own initiation from Swami Vijnanananda Maharaj, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. As he was giving us the mantra and reciting God’s name, it appeared as if he was intoxicated. The atmosphere was in-



Swami Vijnanananda

describable. It is this divine intoxication that one seeks in leading the life of a contemplative. And on obtaining even a bit of that divine joy, one attains fulfilment.



# Contemplation in an Active World

Swami Smaranananda

**A**MONG the many developments in the post-Second World War period, the popularity of contemplation and meditation is particularly significant. With the advancement of technology, the hope of getting more leisure dawned on modern man. But, alas, instead of increased leisure, increased activity has become the order of the day! Instead of rest, restlessness has taken hold of the human heart. What went wrong?

In this age, when progress is reckoned in terms of material development, economics takes centre stage. Activity calls for more activity, resulting in increased production. This, in turn, demands more markets for selling the goods produced. Advertising creates more markets, and that again leads to increased consumerism. Thus the rat race goes on!

In the Bhagavata there is the story of the great king Yayati, who, at the threshold of old age, felt that his desire for worldly enjoyments had not been satiated. So he requested his four sons—one after another—to exchange their youth for his old age. The first three sons refused to do so, but the fourth son, Puru, agreed. Yayati, with the borrowed youth of his son, continued with his enjoyment of worldly pleasures. After some years he suddenly realized that desires can never be satiated by more enjoyment, and uttered this great truth: '*Na jātu kāmāḥ kāmānām-upabhogena śāmyati, haviṣā kṛṣṇavartmeva bhūya evābhivardhate*; Desires are never appeased by more enjoyments; rather they grow all the more fierce, like a smouldering fire fed with ghee.'<sup>1</sup>

Modern people, finding no respite from intense activity on the one hand and boredom on the other, are seeking ways and means of bringing a little peace and quiet to their disturbed minds. In this scenario, they clutch at various kinds of contemplative and meditation practices marketed by the

latest management gurus. It seems that they do derive some benefit from these physical and mental exercises.

But the basic question remains: Is activity opposed to contemplation? In India, for centuries it has been thought that meditation is not compatible with activity—this in spite of the fact that the most sought-after scripture of the Hindus, the Bhagavadgita, advocates intense activity along with deep contemplation.

All activity begins in the mind. It may be to fulfil some desire or to work towards a goal that we act. Activity and contemplation seem apparently contradictory. But both can go on simultaneously. The Gita describes this graphically: 'With the mind purified by devotion to performance of action, the body conquered, and senses subdued, one who realizes one's Self as the self in all beings, though acting, is not tainted. The knower of Truth, being centred in the Self, thinks, "I do nothing at all", though doing many things. He who acts forsaking attachment, resigning himself to Brahman, is not soiled by evil, just as a lotus leaf is untouched by water.'<sup>2</sup>

Emerson, the nineteenth-century New England philosopher, says: 'It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion—it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who, in the midst of the world, keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.'

If we try to understand our mind, we will find that it is the source of all action. This manifests as volition, the activity of the ego. The mind is working ceaselessly. Either it is going towards something or it is turning away from something else. The senses are drawn towards their objects, but it is the mind that gets connected with the senses. It then gets connected with the ego, which makes us think,

‘I am doing this, or I am not doing this, or I will not do that’ and so on. Thus we identify ourselves with the ego and the senses through the mind.

All spiritual practice is concerned with the control of the mind—to direct our thoughts through a channel. Thus, one part of our mind can always be directed towards a goal to be attained while the other parts of the mind may be busy with other things:

‘*Guṇāḥ guṇeṣu vartante iti matvā na sajjate*; It is the [three] *guṇas* (which constitute the senses) that act upon the *guṇas* (as sense objects); with this understanding the sadhaka does not get attached (either to actions or to their results)’ (3.28).

Here lies the secret: to be intensely active, but all the time remaining a witness of one’s actions, keeping one part of the mind directed towards God, the supreme goal of life. Whenever the mind, in the midst of various activities, forgets this goal, one has to take notice and turn it back to God again. Brother Lawrence says that with him the time of prayer is not different from that for any other work. He further says: ‘That useless thoughts spoil all; that the mischief began there; but that we ought to reject them as soon as we perceived their impertinence to the matter in hand, or our salvation, and return to our communion with God.’<sup>3</sup> He was kept busy all the time with the various activities of the monastery where he lived. But by this practice of keeping his mind always tuned to God, he had come to love God and, in spite of his being very little educated, even many of his superiors found it spiritually profitable to converse with him.

It is true that, in order to develop deep faith and love for God, one has to turn away from all things worldly and make God alone one’s goal in life. In this way, in spite of being busy due to the call of various duties in life, one can continue with contemplation of God at all times. In fact, much de-

pends on how we spend the time outside the hours allotted for prayer and meditation. If periods of activity were also well utilized for contemplation, our ability to pray and meditate during allotted hours would be more effective.

It is not work which makes it difficult for us to meditate. It is attachment and ego-consciousness which together carry our minds away from God. But once we have fixed God as the goal of life, the mind will return again and again to God in spite of distractions.

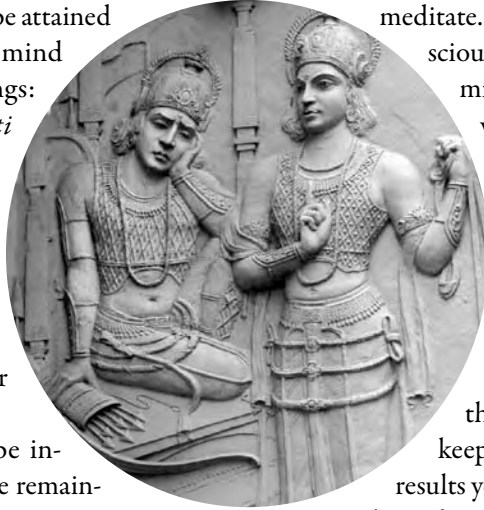
It has been said, ‘Take care of the means, the ends will come of themselves.’ Instead of paying attention to the path we are treading, we keep our minds occupied with the results yet to come. Thus our attention is split and, as a result, full concentration is not achieved.

The Gita says clearly: ‘One who has renounced attachment to the results of karma, who is ever contented and totally non-dependent—such a person, even though very actively engaged in work, in reality does not do anything.’<sup>4</sup>

One seeks solitude only to quieten the turbulent mind. But once the mind is well-controlled, it does not matter whether one is in solitude or in a crowd. What we need to do is to develop the power to withdraw the mind and establish it in the Divine—the Atman.

Now, what is the way to bring the mind under control? The Gita, as well as Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, prescribes *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*: (repetitive) practice and dispassion; or in other words, withdrawal from the many and concentration on the One. Without this, and with an uncontrolled mind, it is impossible to ascend the ladder of yoga, says Sri Krishna in the Gita.

We may be engaged in work which demands our full-attention, but we keep on worrying even when the hours of work are over. If we can regulate our





**The different Upanishads** prescribe methods for seeing Brahman everywhere and realizing one's Self everywhere through various meditations on Brahman. Further, it is accepted that progress on the path of realization occurs in stages—this being a ceaseless expedition from the smaller to the greater. Common objects of our everyday world are also not excluded from the sweep of this all-pervasive vision. The Taittiriya Upanishad prescribes meditation on food, vital force, mind, and other things as Brahman. Considering all this, Swami Vivekananda reached the conclusion that at least in the age of the Upanishads meditation on Brahman was thus harmonized and identified with life and as a result the whole of life became transformed into one single meditation.

—Swami Gambhirananda

daily life with fixed hours for work and meditation, the mind will gradually get accustomed to think of higher things at particular hours. Sri Ramakrishna says: 'When you are engaged in many things in the world, do them with one hand and with the other hold on to God. But, when the work is over, take hold of God with both hands.'

When a person has spent some time practising meditation in solitude, to test how much success has been achieved, he or she will have to come into the crowd in active city life and see how the mind reacts. The proof of the pudding is in the eating; our success in the control of the mind will be measured in terms of our reactions in an irritating atmosphere. In a favourable situation anyone can feel and taste a little success in meditation. But until it is proved in an unfavourable atmosphere, we cannot be sure of success.

Many wonder why the Lord chose the battlefield for teaching Arjuna—and his successors for millennia—the profound truths of spiritual life. But if we think for a while, we can understand that the battlefield of the world, wherein we are fighting this battle of life, is perhaps the best place to test our spiritual sensibility. 'Mām anusmara yudhya ca; Remember Me and fight', says Sri Krishna (8.7).

The warfare inside our bodies and minds goes on endlessly. Only when peace is restored can really effective contemplation be possible. For this purpose *viveka* and *vicāra*—discrimination, and reflection on the world around us—are necessary. But for most people, the paths of karma yoga and jnana yoga are difficult. That is the reason why Sri Ramakrishna has prescribed the *bhakti mārga* as preached by Narada. This is the path of *love*, the art of loving God. This is possible only when we try to remember God more and more till love sprouts in our hearts. Whatever we may be doing, the object of our love should occupy at least a corner of the mind. Thus contemplation of God, in spite of an active life in the world, would be possible.

No doubt, practice in solitude is necessary in the beginning. Later, when the mind gets trained to separate itself from its surroundings and remain fixed on God, it is not difficult to be in an active world and still be a contemplative. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that a sapling needs to be protected from cattle by putting up a hedge around it; similarly a sadhaka needs to practise in solitude for a while. When the mind has learnt to flow towards God in a natural way, there is no more need for solitude.

Another method of converting all work into worship is to do everything for God. '*Yadyat-karma karomi tat-tad-akhilam śambho tavārādhnam*'; All my actions, O Shambhu, are Thy worship.'<sup>5</sup> Ramprasad, the great devotee of Mother Kali, says: 'O my mind, take going to bed as salutation (*pranama*), in sleep meditate on Mother, and think of eating as an offering to Mother Shyama ...'

Thus can activity and contemplation be harmonized, by making God the focus of our lives and then carrying on with our day-to-day activities, dedicating the fruits of our actions to God. ☪

## References

1. Bhagavata, 9.19.14.
2. Bhagavadgita, 5.7–10.
3. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Second Conversation.
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5. Vyasa, *Shiva-manasa-pujana-stotram*, 4.

# The Contemplative Tradition in the Ramakrishna Order

Swami Prabhananda

THE period of eight and a half months that Sri Ramakrishna lived at the Cossipore garden house is popularly considered to be the beginning of the monastic community that later became known as the Ramakrishna Order of monks. What began with a handful of fiery young men gradually became a religious community belonging to the Puri sect of the Dashanami tradition. These monks then took up the mission of living the ideal that Sri Ramakrishna had placed before them and also of spreading his teachings—teachings that their leader, Swami Vivekananda, believed to be the gospel for the modern world.

Sri Ramakrishna's own sadhana was rooted in renunciation—spontaneous renunciation. And renunciation formed the heart of the monastic community that he founded. When Sri Ramakrishna chose Narendra (Swami Vivekananda) as the leader of this group, he also made him its role model. For Sri Ramakrishna recognized that Narendra was a *dhyana-siddha* (an adept in meditation), that he was never attached to lust and gold, that he was free from ignorance and delusion, and that he belonged to the class of ever-free souls. Moreover, he knew that renunciation was the very soul of Narendra's life.

Even when Swamiji was in the West, spreading his master's message, he kept the inner flame of renunciation burning in the hearts of the monks of the Order with his fiery letters. Later, after he returned to India, he inspired them even more with his own life and words. In one address to the monastic community, he described renunciation as 'love of death'. But he also told them that they must adapt themselves to a changing world. Further, he said, 'You must try to combine in your life immense

idealism with immense practicality.'<sup>1</sup> He wanted the members of the Order to be no less than the great rishis of ancient India. He also gave them the motto '*Atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya ca*; For one's own liberation and for the good of the world' to guide them in their life. Thus we find that Swami Vivekananda's life is the perennial guide for the Ramakrishna Order, inspiring its members in all their activities.

## Some Personal Recollections

About a hundred and twenty years have passed since the founding of the Order. Before looking ahead to the future, let us take a look back. My strong curiosity about the mystery of contemplative life brought me in touch with some great souls of the Order. Following are a few brief accounts of some meetings with them:

- In the winter of 1959, when I was a young brahmacharin, I went to the Ramakrishna Mission TB Sanatorium at Dungri, Ranchi. Soon after I arrived, I found a senior swami sitting alone in the courtyard of the monks' quarters. After I prostrated at his feet, he looked at me and said, 'Do you hear the *anahata* sound?' *Anahata* means 'unstruck'. It is the primordial spiritual vibration. Startled by such a question, I could only utter, 'What?' He quietly asked again, 'Do you not hear the sound of *omkar*?' 'What do you say, Maharaj?' I replied. At this he said, 'Why? I hear it continuously.' Then he straightened his back, shut his eyes, and dived deep within his heart. His woollen wrapper dropped from his back, and his partly unbuttoned shirt showed his chest. Before my amazed eyes, the flush on his face spread to his chest, and an ethereal smile spread over his countenance. Four or five minutes

passed. Then he said softly, 'When I sit straight I hear the sound quite distinctly.' After a moment he said, 'I first heard this holy sound in 1911. Since then I have heard it continuously. ... This sound does not come from outside. It emanates from the core of the heart and merges back into it. *Japat siddhi*—one attains it through japa.'



Swami Shantananda

This was Swami Shantananda (1884–1974), a disciple of Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. Once he gave me his personal diary to read, and in it I found some of his spiritual experiences recorded. Later he again asked me several times if I had experienced the *anahata* sound, and I said no. But he encouraged me to practise intense japa. When I was leaving for the Himalayas for six months of tapasya, he reminded me to strive for this experience. He also gave me some money to get milk regularly, for such meditation requires strenuous brainwork. On my return, the first question he asked was if I had heard the sound of *omkar*. When I said no, he encouraged me to continue striving for the experience.

- I first met Swami Premeshananda (1884–1967), also a disciple of Holy Mother, in 1948 or 49 at the Sargachhi Ashrama, and I began visiting him regularly. He was a charming man. Every day after



Swami Premeshananda

his bath he would go to the shrine upstairs and meditate for about half an hour. I watched him closely. Soon after he sat for meditation he would undergo a strange transformation. His face brightened with a flush, which gradually spread to his chest. Later, when he

went down the stairs, I noticed that his steps were unsteady. I was sitting by his side when he was eating his noon meal, and I began to ask him some questions. But I quickly realized that I should not have done so, for I clearly observed that until he had eaten a little food, he could not talk distinctly. I understood that he was still overwhelmed with a spiritual mood from his meditation in the shrine, and naturally it took some time for him to regain his normal state. This happened every day.

- During the summer of 1964 I spent two weeks in the holy company of Swami Atulananda (formerly Cornelius J Heijblom of Amsterdam), a disciple of Holy Mother. He was then staying at Sri Sarada Kutir at Barlowgunj, in the foothills of



Swami Atulananda

the Mussoorie Hills. Normally indrawn, he was a typical contemplative. When he sat for meditation, his face seemed to get bright with a light. His answers to our questions revealed something of the richness of his spiritual experiences. These things have been recorded in the book *Atman Alone Abides*. Whenever he spoke of Swami Turiyananda, a change came over him. Swami Atulananda passed away at the age of 97 on 21 August 1966. During the last three or four days of his life he was repeating 'Jai Ma'. And the last words he uttered were 'Om Ma' and 'Hari Om'.

- In the tradition of the Ramakrishna Order, the outward expression of spiritual experience is scrupulously avoided, for often such expression betrays a desire for special recognition. This obstructs one's progress and even leads one astray. Yet we have seen a few swamis—such as Swami Gadadharananda, a disciple of Swami Shivananda—who could not control their spiritual ecstasies. Swami Gadadharananda passed away in 1971. His experiences accorded with the signs of genuine spiritual experience as they could be experienced by others also

and they did not contradict reason.

- Swami Yatiswarananda and Swami Premeshananda were not public speakers as such, but their talks before groups of devotees always touched the core of one's heart. These talks were unforgettable.



*Swami Purnatmananda*

- Though some of the previous incidents were rare, there was another kind that was quite common. For example, I lived with Swami Purnatmananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, at Almora—once for five months and another time for two

months. As head of the Almora centre, he had many duties. But throughout the day, whenever he had any time, he would sit with his back straight telling his beads. There would be a glow on his countenance that would bring joy to my heart. It reminded me of something 'M' had said: 'You have to see a monk at his best, when he is meditating.'

- Swami Saswatananda (1894–1963) was known as a staunch Vedantin. He taught another young swami and me the *Mandukya Karika*. His words had such conviction and were so powerful that they went deep in our hearts. Once he said: 'All that you see is apparent and illusory. It is only the all-pervading Brahman that you really see.' There was so much force and conviction in these words that



*Swami Saswatananda*

for about three days I strongly felt that what he said was true.

- Swami Hitananda (d. 1984) was a disciple of Swami Shivananda. As soon as he would begin performing the worship in the shrine at Belur Math, he would become an altogether different person. He would seem to radiate spirituality.



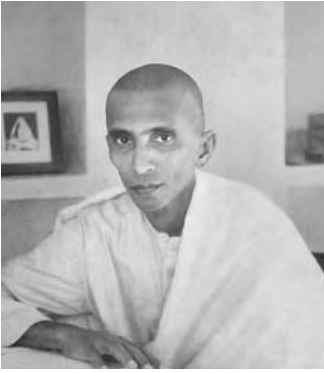
*Swami Hitananda at puja*

- In October 1958 I met Swami Sadashivananda (d. 1960), a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, at the Varanasi Sevashrama. As I made pranams to him, he lovingly embraced me and showered his blessings on me. He repeatedly told me how happy Swami Vivekananda would have been to see a young man like me. I was overwhelmed by his personality, but I could hardly understand him. He tried to impress upon me that Swamiji was all love. Swami Sadashivananda would become a changed person in the presence of bright young men. Later I met him again and had a similar experience.



*Swami Sadashivananda*

- One sweltering summer afternoon in May, 1963, I went by bus to Belur Math. I was to hand over an envelope given by Swami Lokeshwarananda to the General Secretary, Swami Vireswarananda (1892–1985). When I reached the General Secretary's office it was 2.30 p.m., and I was perspiring. Swami Vireswarananda was then going through the mail, and he quietly asked me to sit down on a chair. Then he went over to a cupboard and began preparing a glass of sherbet. Assuming that he was preparing it for himself, I immediately offered my services. But the swami bade me sit quietly. In those days there was only one office assistant in the headquarters office. The swami sent that boy to Belur Bazaar to bring some ice and gave him two paise. Then he re-



Swami Vireswarananda

turned to his mail. After some time the boy returned. When the Swami was satisfied that the pieces of ice were clean, he put them in the tumbler of sherbet and offered it to me. Overwhelmed at this development,

I quietly drank the sherbet with tears rolling down my cheeks.

- Swami Nrisimhananda (d. 1992), a disciple of Swami Nirmalananda, served leprosy patients in the village of Adur in Kerala for forty years. The patients there did not want him to leave them. I went to see him in the company of a senior swami. It was a winter morning, and Swami Nrisimhananda, who was then over seventy years old, was in tattered gerua robes. I humbly offered him my woolen wrapper, but he refused to accept it. I talked with him for some time about his experiences, and later I corresponded with him. He repeatedly assured me that he had realized the truth that our yogis aspire to achieve through japa and meditation. I was deeply impressed by his experiences.

All these incidents, and many more, touched my heart. Such things are not seen in mundane life. They hinted at the joy of spiritual illumination and seemed to invite me to enter the inner chamber of spiritual life.

### **The Foundation of Contemplative Life**

Contemplation is a traditional part of Indian monastic life. Acharya Shankara was the first to organize and systematize Hindu monasticism, and he enjoined the abbots of the monasteries to keep the spirit of tapas (austerity) and jnana (learning) burning in the lives of monks, and also to undertake *pravasa* (tours) to disseminate religious teachings. These things then naturally became a part of the Ramakrishna Order of monks, but with the

added inspiration of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings they took on fresh vigour and a new outlook. This new outlook demanded that the monks live together in groups and forge a community. Such a life itself is a great discipline; especially since Hindu monks have always maintained a fiercely independent spirit.

The mystical tradition in Hindu religious life has its roots in the Upanishads. For example, the *Katha Upanishad* (2.1.1) says: 'God made people's senses directed outward from their very birth; so they always look outside and never within. Rare is the wise person who, desiring immortality, directs his senses inward and perceives the truth of his own innermost Self.'

Accordingly, the Indian mystics took up the study of the inner life and succeeded in penetrating some of the great mysteries of life. But this calls for living an inward life. It requires a shift from the external world to the internal world and demands a reorientation of one's lifestyle, attitudes, and values. The *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.2.4) makes it clear that one cannot attain the Atman without sannyasa. Naturally then, spiritual seekers chose secluded places to concentrate their minds, and they practised detachment from everything material.

### **Tradition, Contemplation, and Meditation**

Let us take a fresh look at the terms 'tradition', 'contemplation', and 'meditation'. The word 'tradition' comes from the Latin noun *traditio* (handing over), which is derived from the verb *tradere* (hand over, deliver). Tradition then is something that is handed down from one generation to another and is generally accepted by the latter. If it were not accepted it would cease to be a tradition. Something that is a heritage can be preserved as a remembrance of the past, but a tradition is something that continues into the present. It is a standard or set of standards consisting of established beliefs, customs, practices, and even patterns of thought and behaviour. But this does not mean that these standards are passed down intact in their form, meaning, or spirit. Again, sometimes apparent breaks in a tra-

dition are actually a kind of transformation engendered by circumstances.

Meditation and contemplation are closely connected, and these words have different meanings and interpretations in different religious systems. When these words are used interchangeably, confusion arises. According to the Western tradition, meditation involves concentration—that is, the focusing of the conscious mind on a single idea, system, doctrine, etc. At the same time, it remains a cognitive and intellectual process. The English word ‘meditate’ comes from the Latin *meditari*, which connotes deep and continued reflection—that is, concentrated and sustained thinking.

The word ‘contemplation’ is derived from the Latin *cum* (with) and *templum* (a consecrated place). Contemplation is considered by some to be the end of an ascetic quest, but it is also considered to be a spiritual stage in itself. Dom Cuthbert Butler pointed out two distinct meanings in the Western contemplative tradition—that is, the objective meaning and the subjective meaning.<sup>2</sup> Indian mysticism, however, does not admit any such distinction.

According to the Hindu tradition—especially in the Yoga and Vedanta systems—meditation is of a higher order than contemplation. It is different from reflective reasoning, and its goal is to attain direct perception of something. While contemplation is thinking about the Divine, meditation is a spontaneous flow of the mind towards the Divine. At the outset, meditation may proceed through an effort of the mind; but with the help of a symbol or image, and strengthened by faith, it should end in absorption in the Divine. Again, contemplation means thinking about the form of and stories about the Divine or an Incarnation, while meditation means keeping the mind fixed uninterruptedly on him or her.

Prayer and japa are also practices that help deepen one’s spiritual life. Japa means repetition of the divine name. Prayer uses words, images, and thoughts to communicate with God, but contemplation and meditation use fewer of these or even

dispense with them entirely. Japa, prayer, contemplation, and meditation are all important tools in spiritual life that help us develop and use a mystical mind and heart.

A contemplative is one who practises contemplation. And contemplative life means a life characterized by contemplation. The contemplative mind is sometimes compared to a bee hovering and buzzing around a flower and the meditative mind to the bee which is already seated on the flower and sipping the honey.

### **Baranagore Math—the Evolution of Monastic Community Life**

The contemplative tradition in the Ramakrishna Order of monks is a living tradition. Here we want to carefully consider the beliefs and practices that are in the community’s consciousness, as also the ideas that have been passed down from earlier days, along with their modern interpretations, if any. We also need to get an understanding of the source and growth of the tradition.

Sri Ramakrishna initiated his monastic disciples—most of them still in their teens—into the mysteries of spiritual life, and from then on they devoted themselves heart and soul to practising the disciplines prescribed by him. The Cossipore garden house then became the crucible for the formation of the Ramakrishna Order. Later, after the Master’s passing away, the disciples banded together under the leadership of Narendranath in a dilapidated house in Baranagore, not far from the Dakshineswar temple. There they took formal vows of *sannyasa*, and engaged in intensive japa and meditation. The whole life of the monastery centred round the shrine, where the sacred remains of Sri Ramakrishna (reverentially referred to as Sriji) were installed and worshipped. Recalling those blessed days, Swami Vivekananda later said:

We used to get up at 3 a.m. and after washing our face etc.—some after bath, and others without it—we would sit in the worship room and become absorbed in japa and meditation. What a strong spirit of dispassion we had in those days! We had



*Swami Vivekananda and others at the Baranagore Math*

no thought even as to whether the world existed or not. ... It was he (Sashi) who would procure, mostly by begging, the articles needed for the Master's worship and our subsistence. There were days when Japa and meditation continued from morning till four or five in the afternoon. Sashi waited and waited with our meals ready, till at last he would come and snatch us from our meditation by sheer force.<sup>3</sup>

Again, describing the severe austerities of those days, Swamiji said:

There were days at the Baranagore Math when we had nothing to eat. If there was rice, salt was lacking. Some days that was all we had, but nobody cared. Boiled bimba leaves, rice and salt—this was our diet for months! Come what might, we were indifferent. We were being carried along on a strong tide of spiritual practices and meditation. Oh, what days! Demons would have run away at the sight of such austerities, to say nothing of men. (62–3)

The saga of the first six years of austerities at the Baranagore monastery greatly inspired the members of the Order in later years. In fact, it continues to be thought of by the members as their model.

### ***The Alambazar Math—a Turning Point***

In the Gita (13.24) it is said, 'Some by meditation perceive the Self in themselves through the mind, some by devotion to knowledge, and some by devotion to selfless work.' But post-Shankara monas-

ticism built a tradition of its own that was plainly opposed to 'devotion to work'. Following this tradition, monks led a life of prayer, worship, meditation, and study.

But some time after the monks of the Ramakrishna Order had shifted their Math to Alambazar, some changes took place in their lifestyle that created agitation in their minds. In fact, the changes occurred on both the ideational level and the physical level. When Swami Vivekananda returned from his first visit to the West, he said one day, 'I shall revolutionize the monastic order.' Previously, 'liberation for oneself' was the ideal of the monks. Now, at the Alambazar Math, Swamiji added the ideal 'and also doing good to the world'. While this new ideal appealed to some of the monks, as also to the novices who had recently joined, other senior monks disagreed with it, as they were apprehensive of its affect on the future of the monastic Order. But Swamiji ignored all opposition.

No doubt, it was a sharp turning point in the life of the Math. And it is doubtful if either the senior or the junior members of the Order could grasp at that time the import of Swamiji's revolutionary move in the larger context of the Ramakrishna Movement. Even later, occasional changes were made when necessary. However, history shows that the monastic community was able to maintain a balance between continuity and innovation, maintaining both a progressive outlook and faithfulness to the tradition.

Thus, owing to the dynamic vision of Swami Vivekananda, the sadhana of service was given a very prominent place in the activities of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. According to Gwilym Beckerlegge: 'The fact that the systematic practice of the sadhana of social service has come to occupy such a place in the institutional life of the Ramakrishna movement might be attributable to Vivekananda's own foresightedness and astuteness; his appeal to Hindu paradigms, his reliance upon the symbol of the sannyasi and his rejection of "reform" rooted in criticism and condemnation of Hindu norms.'<sup>4</sup>

During the past one hundred years, the Rama-



krishna Movement—with the Ramakrishna Order at its centre—has moved forward, and has witnessed the interplay of several historical forces. We shall mention just a few here:

- The religious nationalism generated by Swami Vivekananda raised the national awareness of Indians and ultimately led to the political liberation of the country. Though the Ramakrishna Mission incurred the British Government's wrath for allegedly sheltering freedom fighters, it also faced criticism from the public for not actively participating in politics.
- In post-independence India the Mission has had a share in the national reconstruction programme, in keeping with Swami Vivekananda's general directive.
- In recent times socio-economic changes have brought some prosperity to the monastic community, while progress in science, technology, and management skills have brought changes in outlook. In addition, the increased expansion of the Mission's activities has compelled the limited number of monks to switch from direct service activities to administrative and supervisory jobs.
- Last but not least, recent advances in mass communication and globalization have also affected to a great extent the lifestyle and vision of the monastic community.

The net impact of these things can be seen—in the language of A Giddens, an authority on Western political science and philosophy—in the form of de-traditionalization and re-traditionalization of the monastic community's sacred tradition.<sup>5</sup> Through these processes customs, beliefs, and traditions are scrutinized and gradually reconstituted in different forms. This process of reconstituting new values and traditions has been taking place in the Ramakrishna Order, giving rise to new procedures.

Besides these hitherto unforeseen socio-political pressures on the monastic organization, there are several other dangers and stumbling blocks to living a contemplative life in a world of action. The most powerful among them are lust and greed, which more often than not appear in various dis-

guises. Lust appears in two forms—physical and mental. But comparatively speaking, the second is the more difficult, for it manifests as a craving for social recognition, praise, honour, etc. Both of these have deluded many advanced souls and ruined their spiritual life. Increased exposure today to a larger section of society that is steeped in rampant materialism has made the situation for monastics more complex.

No doubt, with the heavy load of responsibilities and the organization's many social commitments, the monks are engaged in various kinds of mundane activities. The responsibilities of their work also press upon them more and more. In such a challenging situation a monk must perforce learn to strike a balance between contemplation and action—which are, in fact, intimately related. And this balance needs to be sought both ideationally and through proper allotment of available time. But even in very strenuous situations, many monks succeed in keeping the lamp of their inner spiritual life burning.

### ***A Study of the Inner Life of Monks***

Two decades after India had achieved political independence, when the Math and Mission had taken up a large number of developmental activities in education and health care, many monks began to wonder if we might lose the great spiritual legacy handed down to us by our pioneers. At that time I had a chance to make an objective study of the inner life of some of the monks of the Order. In the early 70s I was serving as the Assistant Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan in Kolkata, a 550-bed general hospital. As it is the largest hospital of the Mission, monks from all centres are admitted there. For more than four years I had the opportunity to be at the bedside of monks as they were dying, and my observation of them at these last moments was quite revealing.

A dying person cannot hide his true nature. Seeing how these dying monks faced the hour of death with grace and dignity, I was thrilled. And when I compared their dying moments with those of other


people, I was convinced that the disciplined and spiritually-oriented life of the monks helped them face death without fear, frustration, worry, or anxiety. Moreover, some of them correctly predicted their time of departure, while others gave expression to their spiritual visions, and again others had nothing but blessings for those around them. This simple study convinced me that the current of our spiritual tradition is quite strong among the members of the monastic community.

### Conclusion

Thomas Merton (1915–68), a revered American Trappist monk, once wrote: ‘Without this contemplative orientation we are building churches not to praise Him but to establish more firmly the social structures, values and benefits that we presently enjoy. ... Without true, deep contemplative aspirations, without a total love for God and an uncompromising thirst for his truth, religion tends in the end to become an opiate.’<sup>6</sup>

Like other monastic traditions in India, the new type of monasticism of the Ramakrishna Order puts emphasis on the life of contemplation, which stresses the inner life. But nowadays, with their heavy workload and comfortable living conditions, the monks need to adjust their perspective on their life as a whole in order to keep their inner life intact. They may also need to adjust their living habits. Here especially, Sri Ramakrishna is their guide. According to him, one should mix with people as much as possible and love all, but then one must dwell by oneself in one’s own chamber. In this regard, he gave the example of the cowherd boys and their cows. He said: ‘You can see your true Self only within your own chamber. The cowherds take the cows to graze in the pasture. There the cattle mix. They all form one herd. But on returning to their sheds in the evening they are separated. Then each stays by itself in its own stall. Therefore I say, dwell by yourself in your own chamber.’<sup>7</sup>

In their daily life the monks need to attend to their duties skilfully and efficiently, but at the same time they must fervently enter the chamber of their

heart and remember their spiritual goal. As Sri Ramakrishna often sang: ‘Lighting the lamp of Knowledge in the chamber of your heart, / Behold the face of the Mother, Brahman’s Embodiment’ (ibid.). If the monks keep this advice in mind, it will unfailingly guide them like the needle of a compass. 

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**It seems to be** the invariable rule that every newly started movement should pass through the two stages of opposition and indifference before its principles are accepted by society and humanity at large. ... at the end of this second stage we find it accepted by a consensus of public opinion, as it were, and the ranks of its votaries, henceforth, swell speedily. ... But this third stage of public acceptance is not to be regarded as the millennium. ... For, security of position brings a relaxation of spirits and energy, and a sudden growth of extensity quickly lessens the intensity and unity of purpose that were found among the promoters of the movement. Hence in place of outside opposition we find the budding forth in it of an internal opposition due to the varied opinions of its members, and later, in place of the former spirit of sacrifice for truth, of a struggle to maintain the secure social position by compromising truth with half-truths and a clinging more to the appearance than to the spirit of things.

—Swami Saradananda

# All-inclusive View of the Vedic Seers

Swami Tattwavidananda

A TRADITIONAL verse attributed to the Mahabharata sings the glory of the Vedas thus:

सर्वं विदुर्वेदविदो वेदे सर्वं प्रतिष्ठितम् ।

वेदे हि निष्ठा सर्वस्य यद्यदस्ति च नास्ति च ॥

One who is conversant with the Vedas knows everything, for everything is established on the Vedas. Verily, the present, the past, and the future—all exist in the Vedas.

According to tradition, the Vedas are the inspired utterances of seers or sages called rishis. The tradition further assures us of their unquestionable authenticity. There is a galaxy of Vedic seers to whom Truth was revealed in its different aspects. In this article we shall restrict ourselves to the experiences of a few Vedic seers who do not figure in the Upanishadic literature.

## Genesis of Vasi ha

Among the Vedic seers, Vasiṣṭha shines in his own brilliance. The *ṛks* or Vedic mantras ascribed to him speak volumes for his integral vision of life, ranging from noble conduct and dexterous, dispassionate performance of action to renunciation of egotism, pride, and anger. These qualities also indicate his high spiritual attainments. The seventh mandala of the Rig Veda goes by his name, as he is the seer of the mantras given therein. This Vasiṣṭha Maṇḍala records a mantra beginning thus:

इदं वचः शतसाः संसहस्रमुदग्रये जनिषीष्ट द्विवर्हाः ।

Vasiṣṭha, illustrious in both heaven and earth, rich with a hundred and a thousand (cattle), has addressed this hymn to Agni.<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on this, Sāyanācārya observes that Vasiṣṭha owned countless cows, and that he became

great through his wisdom and wise actions. Legend has it that once King Nimi requested him to officiate as priest in a grand sacrifice. Since Vasiṣṭha had earlier committed himself to going to heaven and solemnizing a sacrifice for Indra, he asked Nimi to put off his sacrifice till his return from the world of the gods. But Nimi was not agreeable to Vasiṣṭha's advice. In his haste, he called Agastya and got his sacrifice performed through him.

When he came to know this on his return from heaven, Vasiṣṭha pronounced a curse that Nimi lapse into unconsciousness. Nimi too was quick to reciprocate the curse. Ultimately, Brahma had to intervene, and Vasiṣṭha was reborn as the son of the Vedic deities Mitra and Varuṇa.

## Vasi ha's Wisdom

Vasiṣṭha's wisdom lies in his sincerely seeking the good of others. The refrain of many a *ṛk* in the seventh mandala runs as follows: 'यूयं पात स्वस्तिभिः सदा नः'; Protect us always through your benevolence.'

The term *svasti* denotes 'unending welfare'. This is significant. 'Unending welfare' means reaching the highest good of life, which includes both material and spiritual attainments. It is interesting to note that to the Vedic seers life was an integrated whole where all the different aspects were happily and purposefully blended.

In this context we may refer to the daśa-rāja war described in the same seventh mandala. In this war, King Sudāsa emerged victorious though simultaneously attacked by ten kings. These latter kings did not care to perform sacrifices. Despite being heavily armed and firmly united, the kings could not strike Sudāsa, as he was favoured and protected by Indra and Varuṇa because he sincerely discharged his duties. That one should not neglect one's daily duties

and responsibilities is the obvious lesson.

Scriptural injunctions must be adhered to under all circumstances; no compromise is to be entertained in this matter, for these injunctions often issue directly from God or from authoritative persons. God descends on earth for the well-being of people in the world, and god-like persons, being free from all personal concerns, can have concern only for the welfare of the world.

In our day-to-day life, two things—happiness and peace—are important. Every living being seeks happiness and hates misery. Happiness is normally derived from our experience of material things through the senses. Following this common trend, like some other Vedic texts, the Vasiṣṭha Maṇḍala abounds in prayers to gods for material prosperity. But the thirty-fifth sukta or hymn is an exception. Here the sage Vasiṣṭha is keen on something greater than what we normally call happiness. All the fifteen mantras except the last two are the outpourings of Vasiṣṭha's heart for peace, the most elusive element in our lives. In saying his prayer, Vasiṣṭha does not make any distinction between animate and inanimate existence. It is the general view that inanimate objects are lifeless and hence lack in importance. But strangely, the objects Vasiṣṭha prays to include mountains, stones, the ocean, noble deeds, the measure of sacrificial posts, and the sacrificial altar. Herein we find the wonderful solution presented by the Vedic seers to the problem of peace. To them the whole universe is a well-connected, integrated whole, where gross objects have their presiding deities—the different cosmic powers—which in turn have their physical counterparts in the human body. This discovery of cohesion underlying the universe helps us appreciate the concept of unity of existence. Thus, prayers to stones and mountains, to animals and plants, elicit reverence instead of ridicule.

### The Tryambaka Mantra

The Vasiṣṭha Maṇḍala also has the renowned *mṛtyuñjaya mantra*—the great destroyer of death in the form of bondage:

त्र्यम्बकं यजामहे सुगन्धिं पुष्टिवर्धनम् ।  
उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान्मृत्योर्मुक्षीय मामृतात् ॥

We worship Tryambaka, the three-eyed one, sweet augments of prosperity. As from its stem the cucumber, so may we be released from the bondage of death, but not deprived of immortality (7.59.12).

Repetition of this mantra is said to be highly effective in delivering us from the snare of maya or worldliness. The mantra is also employed in performing a certain fire sacrifice with *pāyasa* or rice-pudding. Here too the aim is the same—escape from death. The deity prayed to here is Lord Mahādeva, the three-eyed God. In granting spiritual liberation or mukti to individuals, Mahādeva has an important role to play. He has an unusual third eye, which is said to be the wisdom-eye, the eye that emitted fire and reduced Kāma—Cupid or the love-god—to ashes. This has a symbolic significance.

Seeking sensual pleasures is denoted in Sanskrit by the word *kama*. In its widest sense kama denotes desire. The view that God directly intervenes in bringing us into human life is uncommon in Hinduism. Rather, it is generally accepted that various desires latent in our mind are responsible for our embodied life and our experience of the miseries of the world. The *mṛtyuñjaya mantra* is a sincere prayer to Lord Shiva to sever all our worldly ties. The severance of these ties is presented herein with the beautiful simile of a fruit called *urvāruka*, a species of cucumber. This is a creeper that mostly grows along the ground. When fully ripe, the fruit detaches spontaneously from the vine. Similarly, when ignorance falls off totally, the highest freedom is obtained. Except for overcoming ignorance, no other sadhana or spiritual practice is required for obtaining this freedom. The Advaitins, followers of non-dualistic Vedānta, hold freedom to be but the removal of ignorance. The *mṛtyuñjaya mantra*, upholding such a view, lends authority to the Advaitic position. Moreover, through this mantra, the sage calls our attention to a sincere but simple worship of the Lord for the attainment of the highest liberation.

### **Vāsto pati Sūkta**

Another important feature of the seventh mandala is the prayer to the *vāstu devatā*, the guardian deity of one's homestead. People currently attach great importance to *vāstu*—the land where a house is to be built, its location, angular position, and such other details. Residential complexes, temples, sacrificial places, and such other constructions can avert danger if the *vāstu* (location) is purified or rendered free from evil influences. The fifty-fourth sukta that goes by the name Vāstoṣpati Sūkta contains only three *ṛks*. Each *ṛk* begins with the address: 'O Lord of *vāstu*'. Significantly, in the opening stanza the sage prays to the *vāstu devatā* to awaken us. This awakening is important as it places us in the right condition to pray and act for our own welfare. The invoker or sacrificer seeks wealth, protection, peace, and happiness from the deity.

### **Rak oghna Sūkta**

The hundred and fourth hymn of the seventh mandala is called Rakṣoghna Sūkta. There the twin gods Indra and Soma are repeatedly invoked for unleashing their wrath on demons. Oppression by demonic forces is a cause of concern to all; their annihilation alone can enable people to walk the path of peace and prosperity. Therefore, in other sections of the Vedas too prayers are available in plenty for extermination of evil forces.

### **Vaiśvāmītra Ma āla**

The third mandala of the Rig Veda is called Vaiśvāmītra Maṇḍala, where the seer is Viśvāmītra. He is the seer of the famous Gāyatri Mantra, which is widely accepted as the mother or sustaining power of the Vedas, the *vedamātā*. The Gāyatri is the tenth mantra of the sixty-second sukta in this mandala. It is a universal prayer for the spiritual awakening of the person repeating it. Our intellect plays a vital role in all our actions. The intellect is an inner faculty that determines the way voluntary actions are carried out; all actions are invariably preceded by this determination. For example, I can apply my eyes to seeing something only when I am de-

termined to see it. The Gāyatri Mantra is a prayer to the Supreme Divine to guide our intellect. This divine intervention in guiding our intellect is most welcome, as it saves us from the many false steps that we are prone to take. Complete self-surrender to the Supreme Being for guidance ensures the growth and progress we need.

With the opening up of the higher intellect and spiritual faculties through repetition of the Gāyatri Mantra, people become capable of grasping subtle entities, which leads them to realize the Truth, subtler than the subtlest. Thus everyone belonging to and pursuing the Vedic cult owes a profound debt of gratitude to Viśvāmītra. He visualized and delivered this important mantra to the people of all times and places. Through this universal prayer, Viśvāmītra sets in motion the Vedic ideal of divinizing one's personal life and giving it the integrity and fulfillment that are ubiquitously sought after.

Like Vasiṣṭha and other Vedic seers, Viśvāmītra held aloft the ideal of renunciation, personal effort, perseverance, firmness of resolve, and asceticism. Even in his row with Vasiṣṭha these traits were gloriously in view. Viśvāmītra realized that lust, anger, and such other inner enemies are detrimental to spiritual progress. Though they seem insurmountable, we must get rid of them if our spiritual aspiration is to make any headway. Viśvāmītra succeeded in his fight against these enemies and took to the path of intense penance that ultimately earned sainthood for him and made him a legendary seer. He had the distinction of guiding Sri Ramachandra, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, who even took some lessons in the art of warfare from Viśvāmītra. The ninth mantra of the fifty-third sukta of the third mandala describes Viśvāmītra in glorious terms as an eminent sage who is the source of all effulgence and strength. He controlled the gushing waters of mighty rivers; such was his priestly attainment that even Indra, the lord of gods, was fascinated by his meticulous performance of sacrificial rites.

### **Vāmadeva Ma āla**

Among the Vedic seers other than those of the



Upanishads, Vāmadeva is widely admired for his insight and rare spiritual experiences. The fourth mandala of the Rig Veda is ascribed to Vāmadeva. Even while in his mother's womb he realized the supreme Truth and solved the mystery of life and death. The opening mantra of the twenty-seventh sukta in this mandala runs as follows:

गर्भे नु सन्नन्वेषामवेदमहं देवानां जनिमानि विश्वा ।  
शतं मा पुर आयसीररक्षन्नघ श्येनो जवसा निरदीयम् ॥

[Vamadeva says] While still in womb, I knew all the different births of the gods. Before the ensuing birth I had many others in the past, when I had hundreds of strong bodies that firmly protected my body-consciousness. But now, like a hawk, I have rushed out of the body (4.27.1).

Let us have a look at the inner meaning of the *rk*. The different gods mentioned here may denote the sense organs and mind. The original word for god

is *deva*, which means, among other things, 'that which shines or reveals'. The organs of knowledge are sometimes called *deva* because they contribute to the light of knowledge. Here Vāmadeva tells us that birth and death belong to the physical body, of which the sense organs are integral parts, and not to the Self or Atman. Before this truth was revealed to him, he had to pass through numerous births, which were like putting the Self behind strong iron bars over a long period of time. Our strong infatuation with the physical body, and wrongly considering it to be the Self, is what is indicated by this metaphorical imprisonment. But when spiritual knowledge, the experiential knowledge that 'Atman alone exists and other things are false' dawns, infatuation falls off immediately. The instantaneous dawn of knowledge is allegorically presented by the hawk's taking to sudden flight.

Through this wonderful verse, Vāmadeva inspires us to rise above all attachment and identification with the body. The Self is *cit* or Consciousness, and is in no way connected with body or sense-organs, which are material. All connections and associations are only on the physical and mental planes. The Self is beyond everything material and cannot have any connection with anything or anybody. Vāmadeva, having realized that Self which is one, undivided, and without a second, became one with all, even with the so-called inanimate objects. The glorious verse embodying this experience is given below:

अहं मनुरभवं सूर्यश्चाहं कक्षीवाँ ऋषिरस्मि विप्रः ।  
अहं कुत्समाजुनियं न्यूञ्जेऽहं कविरुशना पश्यता मा ॥

I have become the sage Manu, I Sūrya, the sage Kakṣivān, Kutsa, the son of Ārjuni and Uśanā, the great inspirer. May I be looked upon as the Self of all (4.26.1).

### **Sourī k**

In the Vāmadeva Maṇḍala there occurs a mantra beginning हंसः शुचिपद् that goes by the name Sourī Rk (4.40.5), where Sūrya is praised. The Supreme Being in the form of the sun is invoked through this mantra, though his all-pervading nature is well

indicated therein. It is recommended that with all necessary purification (and precaution) one should look at the sun while repeating this mantra. One can make an entry into the abode of Brahman while repeating this text even at the time of one's death. This verse is found at a number of places in the Vedic literature, which fact points to its grandeur and the wealth of meaning that it represents.

### **Family Bonds**

The above brief account of three among the host of Vedic seers draws our attention to their integral vision of life and action. What strikes us most is the spiritual humanism that they propagate. This high ideal can be actualized by fostering solidarity among different members of society. Here our individual families come first. The Vedic seers too were not unaware of this. We are reminded of an immortal prayer of the seer Brahmā that occurs in the Atharva Veda (1.31.4): 'स्वस्ति मात्र उत पित्रे नो; Let there be peace and well-being of our mother as well as our father.'

In India, parents are traditionally considered as God in human form. We must, therefore, serve them and follow their advice sincerely. We should neither show them indifference nor hurt them through our conduct. The profound debt that we owe them can be repaid to some extent if we can make them happy through loving service. In the Sāmmanasya Sūkta of the Atharva Veda, the family is viewed in a wide perspective, and love, amity, mutual trust, and respect among family members are prayed for. The seer, Atharvā, prays:

सहृदयं सांमनस्यमविद्वेषं कृणोमि वः ।  
अन्यो अन्यमभि हर्यत वत्सं जातमिवाघ्न्या ॥  
अनुव्रतः पितुः पुत्रो मात्रा भवतु संमनाः ।  
जाया पत्ये मधुमती वाचं वदतु शन्तिवाम् ॥  
मा भ्राता भ्रातरं द्विक्षन्मा स्वसारमुत स्वसा ।  
सम्यञ्चः सव्रता भूत्वा वाचं वदत भद्रया ॥

[O quarrelsome people], we associate you with such actions which will free you from all mutual hatred and enmity and bring you close to each other. Like the mother cow, very interested in her calf, may you have mutual love and affection.

Let the son act according to the wishes of his father and be like-minded with the mother. Let the wife use sweet words with her husband. May brother and sister not act against the good of each other. May all family members have common goals of life and act collectively so that even in their regular talks they may speak of mutual good.<sup>2</sup>

### **Ak a Sūkta**

In the Vedas, the value of labour is highlighted and the common trend of making a quick buck is discouraged and criticized. Illegal betting and gambling have become popular nowadays. The huge transactions involved therein have been a cause of great worry for administrators, since such practices escalate accumulation of black money and the consequent crime and violence. We may refer to a secular hymn in the tenth mandala of the Rig Veda which goes by the name Akṣa Sūkta and is directly associated with dicing. Here the sage Ailūṣa Kavaṣa describes graphically the plight of a gambler who, in the long run, came to his senses and realized his folly. The dicing-episode of the Mahabharata may have some relation to this.

The following mantra gives a vivid picture of the pain and suffering that the family of the gambler has to undergo:

अन्ये जायां परिमृशन्त्यस्य यस्यागृधद्वेदने वाज्यक्षः ।  
पिता माता भ्रातर एनमाहुर्न जानीमो नयता बद्धमेतम् ॥

Others caress the wife of him whose riches the potent dice covet. His mother, father, brothers say, 'We know him not, bind him and take him away.'<sup>3</sup>

After describing the helpless condition of the gambler in a very realistic way through a few other stanzas, the seer of the Akṣa Sūkta pronounces his immortal advice:

अक्षैर्मा दीव्यः कृषिमित् कृषस्व वित्ते रमस्व बहु मन्यमानः ।  
तत्र गावः कितव तत्र जाया तन्मे वि चष्टे सवितायमर्यः ॥

Never play with dice; take to agriculture, remain contented with wealth gained therefrom; in agriculture are your cows and wife. The Lord Savitṛ, the visible inspirer, tells me this (10.34.13).



**In the Upanishads**, the rishis were those who had practically abandoned their attachment to the affairs of the world and had taken their abode in the forests. But in the Rig Vedic literature, the rishis were the advanced citizens of the period, the gifted poets. They had not abandoned their interest in the problems of life in this world. They lived as members of the family, propitiating gods with their sacrifices and with their prayers. They prayed for family happiness; they prayed for heroic children and grandchildren and also for success in social life. —C Kunhan Raja

The ‘dice-hymn’ delivers this eternally important message of the fairness of purpose and process in action. Life without action is impossible, and those actions alone can lead us to the threshold of Truth which are done honestly, dispassionately, and without any ulterior motive.

When we take to easy and clever ways, we deny the importance of and the honour associated with true labour. As soon as we fall prey to this, we indulge in a life of luxury and indolence. By leading such a life we ruin ourselves and also ruin our society. The sage Ailūṣa, therefore, exhorts us to eschew avarice and follow the path of contentment. His advice to the gambler to take to agriculture as a profession may emphasize both agriculture and any other profession where people can earn money and ensure sustenance by exerting themselves. This could be a lesson to the people of present-day society, where unemployment and poverty are widespread. The currently popular self-employment movement may trace its origin to the most ancient Vedic literature.

### Bhik u Sūkta

The tenth mandala also has the hymn known as Bhikṣu Sūkta. Through the nine verses comprising the hymn, the sage Āṅgīrasa praises eloquently the path of charity and condemns close-fisted miserly people for their narrow, self-centred attitude. The sixth stanza of the hymn runs thus:

मोघमन्नं विन्दते अप्रचेताः सत्यं ब्रवीमि वध इत् स तस्य ।  
नार्यमणं पुष्यति नो सखायं केवलाघो भवति केवलादी ॥

Vainly he procures and owns food who does not care to share or distribute it to others. He is a person of low intellect. Truly I tell you, that food does him more harm than good. He propitiates neither gods nor friends. He eats alone (that is, eats for his own sake) and thus incurs sin (10.117.6).

The same idea is echoed in the Bhagavadgita and *Manu Samhita*, where great emphasis is laid on the liberal distribution of food.


The eighth verse of the same sukta brings out nicely the insatiable human greed for wealth. Even wealthy people always look for wealth from others wealthier than themselves. The rishi says:

एकपाद्भ्यो द्विपदो वि चक्रमे द्विपात् त्रिपादमभ्येति पश्चात् ।  
चतुष्पादेति द्विपदामभिस्वरे संपश्यन् पङ्क्तिरुपतिष्ठमानः ॥

The person having one part of wealth pursues relentlessly the way of the person with two parts of wealth. The one having two parts of wealth runs after him who possesses three parts. The person with four parts too feels inclined to follow suit, having observed the actions of the persons possessing lesser wealth (10.117.8).

The commentator Sāyana brings out the message contained in this stanza: ‘In gathering wealth (even) rich persons depend on each other. Therefore, let no one brag, “I possess wealth.”’

### In Conclusion

The Vedic seers teach us in clear terms that life is a well-connected whole, all aspects of which need to be taken care of. The great and illustrious sages make no distinction between the sacred and the secular and passionately invite us to foster amity and solidarity: ‘मित्रस्य मा चक्षुषेक्षध्वम् ; Let us see through the eyes of our friend.’<sup>4</sup> 

### References

1. Rig Veda, 7.8.6.
2. Atharva Veda, 3.30.1-3.
3. Rig Veda, 10.34.4.
4. Shukla Yajur Veda, 5.34.

# Contemplation on Om, the Gayatri, and the Mahāvākyas

Swami Mukhyananda

## The Aims of life

**H**UMAN beings pursue several aims in life. They strive to attain them according to their conception of the goal of life, their own nature and aptitude, stage of life, and capacities. In Hindu thought these are called the *puruṣārthas* (the human ends). Hindu socio-spiritual thinkers have classified them broadly into four categories, in a graded manner, according to the inner growth of the individual, namely: (i) *kāma*, fulfilment of various psychosomatic desires, and advancement in social life; (ii) *artha*, acquisition of wealth, property, and status for the fulfilment of kama; (iii) *dharma*, development of moral and ethical virtues in the context of society, to elevate personal life and character to gain honour and esteem; pursuit of dharma leads to unselfishness and broadens one's vision. It generates power of discrimination and makes people fit candidates for the pursuit of (iv) *mokṣa*, attainment of their highest end, the summum bonum, the supreme goal of life as spiritual beings, which is their real nature. They attain freedom from identification with the ephemeral physical personality and realize the identity of their inner being (Atman) with the universal spiritual Reality (Brahman), the ground and source of the universe and all its beings, and thereby realize their spiritual oneness with all in Brahman (*sarvātma-bhāva*).

As in secular education, in spiritual development too people are in different stages of development. Most people are at the first two stages of kama and artha. But after reflection on life's experiences and the teachings of the seers and scriptures, some rise to the higher stage of dharma. The cultivation of dharma leads to purification of the mind,

which then acquires the power of discrimination between the *priya* (pleasant) and the *śreya* (good), the ephemeral and the eternal. They renounce all selfish worldly interests based on the physical personality, and devote themselves to spiritual life in order to attain the supreme goal of life. By study of the scriptures and instructions from the spiritually enlightened ones, they strive to attain moksha, the summum bonum of human life.

## The Hidden Self

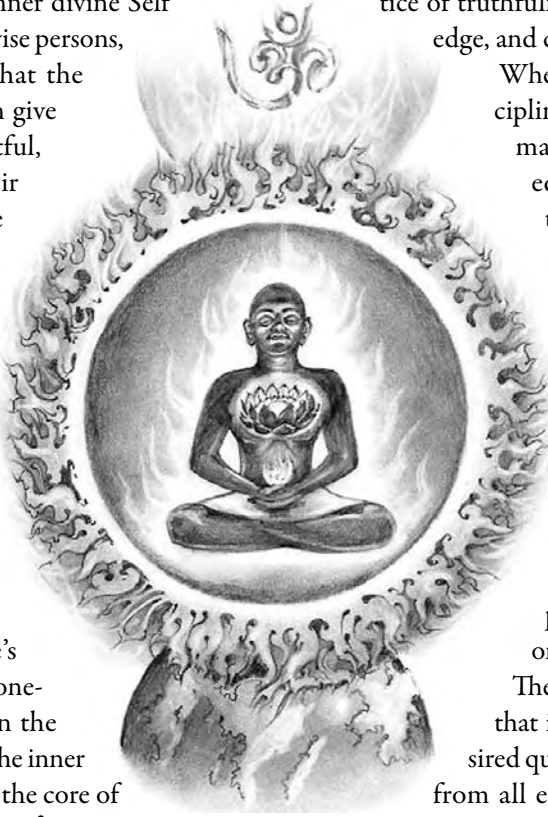
Children do not know their latent talents and capacities. But parents and teachers know that children have intelligence and various talents dormant in them which can be developed and manifested through instruction and training. Similarly, the spiritually enlightened seers (rishis) tell humankind that apart from their physical bodies, their inner being is of a spiritual nature; that the immortal Atman (Self)—*sat-cit-ānanda*—is within all as their real Being; and that they can realize it by practising spiritual disciplines (*sadhana*) prescribed in the scriptures. In the mango seed lies hidden the capacity to produce a mango tree and luscious mangoes, when properly cultivated. We cultivate a mango tree for its fruits, though its wood and leaves are also useful, and the tree also gives shade and adds to the beauty of a place. Likewise, in human life we attain kama, artha and dharma (the *trivarga*), which, being based on the mortal physical body and an ever-changing universe, are ephemeral; but people find their supreme fulfilment (*nirśreyasa*) only when they realize their real, divine Atman and its oneness with Brahman, the infinite, supreme, divine Reality. Worldly achievements relate to human

beings' socio-physical personalities and not to their immortal divine Self.

### Approaching the Self

But the attraction of the senses and worldly life are very strong, for people generally live their life based on their external psychosomatic personalities and are not aware of their inner divine nature. The *Katha Upanishad* points out that our senses and mind by nature go outward towards sense objects and do not see the inner divine Self (*antarātman*).<sup>1</sup> But some wise persons, who have examined all that the senses and worldly life can give and have become thoughtful, discriminate and turn their eyes inward, renounce ephemeral worldly attractions, and strive to attain the permanent and the immortal. A wise and heroic person with determination alone seeks the inner immortal Self (*pratyak-ātman*): '*Kaścit dhīraḥ pratyak ātmānam aikṣat āvṛtta cakṣuḥ amṛtat-tvam icchan*' (ibid.).

When one turns one's eyes inward and examines one-self, one finds, as stated in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, that the inner Self is hidden deep within the core of the heart (*nihitam guhāyām*),<sup>2</sup> within the five layers (*pañca-koṣas*) of personality of different grades, from the gross *annamaya-koṣa* to the subtlest *ānandamaya-koṣa*. But the *Katha Upanishad* assures us that it can be attained by those whose minds are purified of extrovert tendencies and made subtle, sharp, and concentrated: '*Dṛśyate tu agryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣma darśibhiḥ*'.<sup>3</sup> They resort to *adhyātma yoga*, discriminative concentration on the Self (1.2.12), as taught by the scriptures and the guru. In his commentary on the Bhaga-



vadgita, Acharya Shankara points out: '*Śāstra-ācārya-upadeśa-sama-damādi-saṁskṛtaṁ manaḥ ātma-darśana kāraṇam*'; The mind that has been purified by the instructions of the scriptures and the guru and by *sama-dama* (physical and mental restraint) and other spiritual disciplines is the instrument for the perception of the Atman.'<sup>4</sup> The *Mundaka Upanishad* declares: '*Satyena labdhāḥ tapasā hi eṣa ātmā samyak jñānena brahmacāryeṇa nityam*'; This Atman is attained by unceasing practice of truthfulness, austerity, right knowledge, and continence.'<sup>5</sup>

When by virtue of spiritual disciplines the mind is purified and made subtle and one-pointed, and overcoming the extrovert tendencies is filled with an intense desire to attain the Self, then only does a person become a fit candidate (*adhikārin*) to realize the Self. The *Vivekachudamani* points out that success in the endeavour especially depends on the *adhikārin*,<sup>6</sup> the other facilities of time, place, and the like being only auxiliary for the purpose.

The *Katha Upanishad* declares that if one does not have the desired qualities, has not turned away from all evil and become calm and peaceful by the control of the senses and renunciation of worldly desires, one cannot attain the Self by mere intellectual eminence and study of the scriptures.<sup>7</sup>

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* too prescribes moral and spiritual virtues (*yama* and *niyama*) as preliminary, fundamental steps for yoga sadhana to realize the Self, one's real nature (*svarūpa*).

The Advaita system of Vedānta, which inculcates the ideal of realization of the Atman-Brahman identity, specially lays down four important spiritu-

al disciplines (*sādhana catuṣṭaya*), and Sri Shankara declares that bereft of them one will not succeed in one's efforts to realize the ideal—'*Sāadhanāni atra catvāri ...; Yeṣu satsu eva sannīṣṭhā yad-abhāve na siddhyati*'—and elaborates the four disciplines.<sup>8</sup>

### Mantra and Sadhana

When one has become a fit candidate for the chosen ideal by cultivating the above disciplines and virtues, there are several paths and methods open to one to realize the supreme goal, namely the identity of Atman and Brahman. We shall now consider briefly contemplation on the great mantras (spiritual formulae)—Om, the Gayatri and the *mahāvākyas*—for the purpose of this realization. These are called mantras because by proper contemplation on their import (*mananāt*), they remove the inner obstacles (*trāyate*) and facilitate realization (*mananāt trāyate iti mantrah*). These mantras are for the realization of the supreme Advaitic ideal of identity of the Atman and Brahman, the individual Self and the universal Self. For this purpose, one has to concentrate and make the mind thoroughly absorbed in the ideal they represent. It is said, *yat dhyāyati tat bhavati*, what one contemplates on with intensity that one becomes or attains. The Gita says, '*Yo yat śraddhaḥ sa eva saḥ*; Whatever is one's firm faith and conviction, that one becomes (in due course).'<sup>9</sup> Firm faith and conviction (*śraddhā* and *viśvāsa*) in the ideal and in the instructions of the guru and the scriptures is of great importance. In spiritual literature this is emphasized again and again in many ways. A doubting person is lost (*saṁśayātmā vinaśyati*), says the Gita (6.40).

The Gita is a great practical guide for the realization of spiritual ideals. While the Upanishads, known as Vedānta, teach *brahma-vidyā*, the Gita is also a *yoga-sāstra*, a practical guide, for its realization, as the colophon states at the end of every chapter in the book. The Gita declares that complete absorption in the ideal is necessary for realization: '*Tad buddhayaḥ tad-ātmānaḥ tan-niṣṭhāḥ tat-parāyaṇāḥ*'; Whose mind is absorbed in That,

whose self is That, whose steadfastness is in That, whose consummation is That' (5.17).

For taking up any spiritual sadhana and succeeding therein, one must first become a fit candidate equipped with the prescribed spiritual disciplines and moral and ethical virtues. One must also be aware of the meaning and significance of the mantras. They must all be properly oriented and applied to the achievement of the ideal. Without intense aspiration and diligent application of the mind in the proper way, one will not be able to succeed even with great spiritual effort—'*Tapasā vā api alingāt na ayam ātmā labhyah*'.<sup>10</sup> A ladder will help one climb up only if it is properly hitched, but if it is lying flat, no amount of going up and down the rungs will be of any use.

युञ्जीत प्रणवे चेतः प्रणवो ब्रह्म निर्भयम् ।

प्रणवे नित्ययुक्तस्य न भयं विद्यते क्वचित् ॥

*One should concentrate one's mind on Om, (for) Om is Brahman, beyond fear. For a person ever fixed in Brahman, there can be no fear anywhere.* —Acharya Gaudapada

### Om, the Gayatri, and the Mahāvākyas

1. Om (Aum) is the sound symbol and name of Brahman: '*Om iti brahma*', '*Om iti eka akṣaram brahma*'; Om, the single syllable indicating Brahman.' It is also called *praṇava*, denoting Brahman: '*Tasya vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ*'.<sup>11</sup> The *upāsana* (contemplation) of Om is advocated in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, and other spiritual works in various ways. It is *śabda brahman*, Brahman in the form of 'silent sound' (*anāhata dhvani*), which manifests as thought and ideas and becomes the source of the manifestation of the variegated universe and its beings.<sup>12</sup> From the word one recalls its denotation. The name and the named are correlates; the name brings to mind the object named and, conversely, the object recalls the name. So in spiritual life, repetition of the name (*japa*) of the *iṣṭa devatā* (Chosen Deity) is advocated as an important means of

realization.

Om is the name of Brahman: ‘*Om tat sat iti nirdeśo brahmanah trividhaḥ smṛtaḥ*; Om, Tat, Sat: this has been declared to be the triple designation of Brahman.’<sup>13</sup> The *Katha Upanishad* says, ‘*Sarve vedā yat padam āmananti, tapāṁsi sarvāṇi ca yat vadanti ... tat te padam saṅgrahaṇa pravakṣye, om iti etat*; The goal which all the Vedas declare, which all austerities speak of ... I will tell you briefly: it is Om’; and advocates it as the supreme means of realization of Brahman.<sup>14</sup> After studying the nature of Brahman through the scriptures, and grasping clearly the significance of Om with the help of a spiritually advanced guru, if one repeats Om in the prescribed manner, one will realize Brahman, just as repeating the name of the deity—Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, or others—one realizes them.<sup>15</sup> ‘*Om iti evaṁ dhyāyatha ātmānam*; Meditate on Atman as Om,’ says the *Mundaka Upanishad*.<sup>16</sup> By proper contemplation on Om, one realizes the Atman and its identity with Brahman.

2. The Gayatri mantra is also an important means of realizing Brahman. It is very helpful in making the mind a fit instrument for the realization of the supreme Truth. It is addressed to the sun of spiritual light (Savitā) as a symbol of Brahman. It is called the Sāvitrī mantra, but is well known as the Gayatri mantra, because it is in the gayatri metre in the Vedas, and is the supreme mantra in that metre—just as the Bhagavadgita is well known as the Gita. It is a prayer for spiritual illumination and stimulation of the intellect to realize the highest Truth. In the *Isha Upanishad* also some verses (15–16) are addressed by the sadhaka to the sun as ‘Pūṣan’ to help

in realizing the Truth hidden by His ‘golden disc,’ by withdrawing His blinding brilliant rays. Verse sixteen declares the identity of the sadhaka with the divine Person in the sun.

3. There are various theistic mantras for the realization of the Divine as personal deities such as Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, and Kali. But Om, Gayatri, and the *mahāvākyas* (great statements or dicta) are for the realization of the supreme impersonal Reality, Brahman—immanent in all as the Atman—and their identity. While Om and the Gayatri are helpful in sadhana and indirectly indicate the ideal, the *mahāvākyas* directly inculcate it. The following four, occurring in the Upanishads, are recognized as the *mahāvākyas*: (i) *Prajñānam brahma*, (ii) *Ayam ātmā brahma*, (iii) *Tat tvam asi*, and (iv) *Aham brahmāsmi*.<sup>17</sup> Taken together, they indicate respectively the nature of Brahman, its immanence in all beings as the Atman, the identity of Atman and Brahman, and its realization by the aspirant within him- or herself. They have to be properly understood by studying the context in which they have been declared, with the guidance of a competent guru. One must not try to practise sadhana

independently, for this is a very subtle path and difficult to comprehend (*na suvijñeyah*), as the Atman is hidden deep within and covered over with several psychosomatic layers. There are many pitfalls, and one may get trapped in ego culture instead of spiritual culture. All spiritual sadhana is meant to mitigate the ego based on the psychosomatic personality. The Gita points out how one ought to approach the guru in a reverential and serviceful attitude: ‘*Tat viddhi pranīpātena*

VIVEKANANDA ILLAM, CHENNAI



Delivering the Mahavakyas

*paripraśnena sevayā*.<sup>18</sup> The Upanishads also emphasize that one must go to a guru only (*gurum-eva*), after acquiring fitness for sadhana, ‘*Sa gurum-eva abhigacchet*’; and ‘*Ācāryāt hi eva vidyā vidaditā sādhiṣṭam prāpatiti*.’<sup>19</sup> Acharya Shankara also points to this emphasis in his commentaries on the Upanishadic verses.

The *mahāvākyas* are so called because they declare the supreme Truth of the divinity of the Self within all as the Atman, and its identity with the infinite spiritual Reality, Brahman—the source of the universe and all its beings, immanent in all. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* declares that, by realizing Brahman which is hidden in the heart of all beings as the Atman, one attains the Supreme: ‘*Brahma-vid āpnoti param*.’<sup>20</sup>

Contemplation on Om and the Gayatri help the sadhaka in making the mind pure and concentrated and fit for realizing the ideal denoted by the *mahāvākyas*.

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* points out that Brahman is ‘*Satyam-jñānam-anantam*; Truth, Knowledge, Infinity’ (ibid.), and the *Aitareya Upanishad* declares that Brahman is of the nature of supreme consciousness: ‘*Prajñānam brahma*’. It is the ground and source of all manifestation and is immanent in all as the Atman: ‘*Ayam ātmā brahma*’. It is hidden in the core of one’s psychic heart: ‘*Nihitam guhāyām parama vyoman*’ (ibid.). You are therefore in your real being that Atman: ‘*Tat tvam asi*.’ But the Atman is deep within (*abhyantarah*), enveloped by the psychophysical personality made up of five coverings of different grades (*pañcakōṣas*)—physical, vital, mental, intellectual, and mystical. However, one has an intuitive notion of it as the source and basis of the notion of ‘I’. Acharya Shankara points out in the *Vivekachudamani*: ‘*Asti kaścit svayam nityam-aham-pratyaya-lambanah; avasthā-traya sākṣī san pañca-kōṣa vilakṣaṇah*; There is some absolute entity (Atman), the eternal substratum of the consciousness of egoism (*aham-pratyaya*, the notion of ‘I’), the witness of the three states (*avasthā-traya*: *jāgrat*, *svapna*, *suṣupti*), and distinct from the five coverings.’<sup>21</sup> One has to contemplate

with deep concentration and discrimination and go beyond the five *kōṣas*, which are non-Self, and realize the Atman, which is one with Brahman. When the sadhaka realizes the truth of his own being clearly, he exclaims, ‘*Aham brahmāsmi*—Verily, I am Brahman!’

The discriminative analysis of the *śarīra-traya* (the gross, subtle, and causal bodies, made up of the *pañca-kōṣas*), and the philosophical study of the three states of consciousness (*avasthā-traya-prakriyā*) are the direct means for the realization of Atman-Brahman. Other yogas as taught in the Gita and other works are helpful in the preliminary stages, to make the mind a fit instrument. The *Vivekachudamani* of Acharya Shankara is of great help in having a clear understanding of the nature of the complex human personality and its inner being, as well as the supreme Goal and the means to its attainment.

PB

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# Contemplation in the Upanishads

Swami Atmajnananda

YOGA and Vedanta have lately become popular as techniques for managing the stress of the present-day world. It is therefore quite appropriate that we examine the deep insights found in the source of these teachings, the Upanishads; for the Upanishads have a great deal to teach us about contemplation.

Contemplation, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means ‘The act of thinking deeply about something in a calm and careful way’. Accordingly, the word contemplation does not necessarily have religious connotations, although the very process of contemplation is conducive to intuitive perception. In the Indian context, the Sanskrit term *dhyāna* is usually translated as *meditation*. However, a few scholars, especially Ananda Coomaraswamy, maintain that since the root *dhyai* essentially means ‘to think’, ‘to cogitate’, *dhyana* can also be equated with contemplation. The word contemplation has a specific connotation in the Western or Christian tradition. The Latin word *contemplare*, meaning to gaze attentively, has a different meaning in the mystical sense: ‘Knowledge consisting in the partial or complete identification of the knower with the object of knowledge with the consequent loss of his own individuality.’<sup>1</sup> In the Western traditions, contemplation is considered higher than cogitation and meditation, and is therefore akin to *samadhi*. It is also used to suggest a mode of life dedicated to prayer and spiritual pursuits, commonly called *tapas* in Sanskrit.

## Upanishads—the Result of Contemplation

The Upanishads form the final portion of the Vedas, which is a vast compilation of revealed knowledge. Since they generally appear at the end of the Vedas, and because they are the culmination of Vedic

thought, they are called Vedanta. While defining the word Upanishad, Shankaracharya says: ‘Seekers of emancipation ... deliberate on it [the knowledge that is called *upanishad*] with steadiness and certainty.’<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Upanishads are the product of contemplative life and are flashes of illumination revealed to individuals who were not necessarily recluses, but who often were kings and administrators—active men and women. This clearly indicates that contemplation was and is a way of life that does not necessarily demand withdrawal from the world. Rather, the emphasis is on refining our instruments of perception and attuning our minds to perceive the Reality behind this facade of variety.

The Upanishads are a deviation from the thought patterns prevalent in the society of those days. They place life in a new perspective: even religious practices done with the intention of leading a comfortable life here and hereafter are categorically called mundane. The Upanishads advise humanity to turn away from little, transient benefits and aspire after spiritual perfection. The essential nature of this world, the individual self and the supreme Self, and their interrelation form the subject matter of the Upanishads. As Acharya Shankara points out, the Upanishads, with motherly concern, never tire of reminding us of our true nature. In the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*, Yājñavalkya conveys to Maitreyī the great truth that the pure spirit—Atman—is the ultimate object of all forms of love and is therefore to be understood as eternal bliss; this Atman should be realized through the duly regulated scheme of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*—knowing the truth from the Upanishads, investigating and discussing it, and constantly contemplating upon it. The ‘Madhukanda’ of the same Upanishad prescribes the process of negation for contempla-



tion: ‘*athāta ādeśo neti neti*’.<sup>3</sup> The *Katha Upanishad* clearly specifies the need for contemplation: ‘A rare discriminating person, desiring immortality, turns his eyes away [from worldly objects] and then sees the indwelling Self.’<sup>4</sup> So contemplation was an important practice during Upanishadic times and was undertaken by all spiritual aspirants.

### Upasanas as Tools for Contemplation

The principal Upanishads contain many similes and illustrations to help the contemplative process. In the early Upanishads, *upāsana* is the term most frequently employed to designate the process of contemplation. *Dhyāna* also occurs occasionally, but does not have the distinctive connotation that it acquires in the later Upanishads, and more specifically in the *Yoga Sutra*. Derived from the verbal root *as*, ‘to sit’, *upasana* is literally ‘sitting near’. Shankaracharya also defines it as meditation in his commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.9): ‘Upasana means reaching by the mind the form of a deity or something else as delineated in scriptural passages relating to meditation, and concentrating the mind on it, uninterrupted by secular thoughts, until identity with that deity or other thing is imagined in the same degree in which identity is now imagined by us with our body.’ The word *nididhyāsana*, appearing in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (2.4.5), also indicates contemplation. Yājñavalkya, while instructing his wife Maitreyī, says, ‘The Self, my dear Maitreyī, should be realized—should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated upon.’ However, the Upanishads consider verbal knowledge or intellectual understanding of the precepts to be secondary to direct intuition.

The real aim of *upasana* is to effect a correspondence of subject (*dhyātā*) and object (*dhyeya*), ‘identity with the deity’. The notion of attaining identity and so going beyond the fetters of both the sacred and the mundane can be seen in the *Purusha Sukta*. This concept of considering all actions and events of mundane existence as a cosmic *yajna* was further developed in the *Bhagavadgita*. The Vedic rituals were transformed in such a way that the *yaj-*

*nas* became the *upasanas* of the Upanishads. In the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, we find many sacrifices being converted into mental concepts for contemplation, with the assurance that such contemplation is equally efficacious. Shankaracharya explains that meditation is a more effective means of obtaining the desired results because any defect in the performance of a ritual according to the scriptures, however minor, could invalidate the whole procedure. The huge expenditure incurred in the performance of such rites is also a deterrent to their performance. In addition, the popularity of Buddhism and its rationalistic enquiry could have had a numbing effect on the performance of sacrifices.

### Types of Upasana

That the realms of thought and matter are inter-related is a basic tenet of Indian thought. ‘*Yo yacchraddhaḥ sa eva saḥ*; as per the faith, so is the man’ and ‘*taṁ yathā yathopāsate tad-eva bhavati*; as a person meditates so he becomes’, are indicative of this.<sup>5</sup> The idea is that as one attains identity with a particular object, one inherits or assumes those properties which characterize the object. The *Chhandogya Upanishad* is a storehouse of many such meditations, and they lead the aspirant from the gross to the subtle through the process of such identification. Objects of daily experience, various forces of nature, and the various organs of action and perception in the individual are related to the macrocosmic powers; this enables the contemplator to view the whole of creation as one great unit with infinite dimensions. The contemplator starts to see the world and him- or herself as specific parts in a homogeneous whole. This grand vision prepares one to intuitively perceive Brahman, which is beyond all modes of conceptualization.

Gradually, the use of symbolic words as objects of meditation became popular. *Om* became the best *ālambana* or support for meditation. The *udgītha upāsana* of the *Chhandogya Upanishad* is an elaborate delineation of the *praṇava* or *Om*. Such meditations are called *pratīka upāsana*: the meditator attributes various qualities to the object of medi-

tation, say, Brahman, and thereby tries to raise his or her consciousness with their help. Qualities like bliss, fearlessness, and immortality, when meditated upon, bring about a higher awareness through an expansion of consciousness. The purpose of all such meditations is to transcend the gross world by stages and reach a state wherein one is able to comprehend the Absolute, which is beyond the mind and the senses.



VIVEKANANDA ILLAM, CHENNAI

Upasanas with an element of devotion are also seen in the *Brihadaranyaka*, *Chhandogya*, and *Taittiriya Upanishads*. The *Chhandogya Upanishad* (1.6.6–8) says, ‘Then, this one, the golden Person who is seen in the sun, who has a golden beard and golden hair, whose every part from the nail upward is golden ...’ The *Mundaka Upanishad* (2.1.4) speaks of the Cosmic Person as having fire as his head, the sun and moon as his eyes, the Vedas as his voice, the earth as his legs, and so on. Ultimately, the seers were divinizing the whole of existence by saying that this whole of creation is, as it were, covered by Truth: and it is to be perceived not at some other point of time or in some other world but *ihaiva*—here and now.

The Upanishads abound in beautiful imagery. Apart from focusing the attention of the aspirant, this imagery is intended to make the concepts simpler and more endearing. The *Katha Upanishad* is a poetic allegory of the spiritual quest. It has this to say about our human vehicle: ‘Know the self as

the master of the chariot and know the body as the chariot itself. Know the intellect to be the charioteer and the mind as the reins. The wise speak of the senses as the horses and their objects as the paths on which they tread. The individual soul, associated with the body, senses, and mind, is the enjoyer. ... The person, however, who has as charioteer a discriminating intellect, and who has under control the reins of the mind, attains the end of the road, and that is the highest place of Vishnu—the all encompassing Truth.’ The process of restraining the mind is also specified: ‘The discriminating person should merge the organ of speech into the mind; the mind into the intelligent self; the intelligent self into the Great Soul; and the Great Soul into the Peaceful Self. ... The wise ones describe that path to be as impassable as a razor’s edge, which, when sharpened, is difficult to tread on.’<sup>6</sup> The *Mundaka Upanishad* (2.2.2–5) has another beautiful way of expressing the same process of meditation: ‘This immutable, immortal Truth called Brahman is to be penetrated. Taking hold of the bow of the Upanishads, one should fix on it an arrow sharpened by meditation. Drawing the string, hit that very target that is the Imperishable, with the mind absorbed in its thought. Om is the bow; the soul is the arrow; and Brahman is called its target. It is to be struck unerringly. One should become one with It just like an arrow. ... Give up all other vain talk.’

### Preparations for Contemplative Life

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.4.19, 21) says that, after study and constant reflection, ‘Brahman should be realized through this mind alone. There is no separateness in It. He who sees difference goes from death to death as it were. ... The wise aspirant should know this alone, and having known this [through *śravaṇa* and other means], should attain intuitive knowledge. He should not think of too many words, for that is particularly tiring to the organ of speech.’ Restraining the external organs of action and internal organs of perception forms the preliminary step of spiritual life. *Manana* (reflection) results from *mauna* (silence). Acharya

Shankara further expands the idea of conservation of thought and speech: ‘*yogasya prathama-dvāram vān-nirodhaḥ*; control of speech is the first step to yoga.’ With such a trained mind, the aspirant proceeds to contemplate on the Truth that forms the substratum of this creation and on the Creator who controls it.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* has some poignant similes to present the process of creation. ‘As a spider spreads out and withdraws its thread, as the herbs grow on the earth, and as from a living man issues forth hair, so out of the Imperishable does the universe emerge here.’<sup>7</sup> Such similes help spiritual aspirants to realize the Imperishable behind the visible universe and draw their externalized mind from the gross to the subtle. Creation according to the Upanishads is an effortless process; we human beings are merely cogs in the wheel. Nevertheless, we consider ourselves so important and see ourselves as the centre of the universe. All miseries are due to this false perspective. The Upanishads repeatedly point out that meditation accompanied with knowledge liberates human beings. Yajnavalkya says in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* that this whole Universe functions as per the wishes of the Supreme Being. Even the great forces of nature obey his command. The cosmic rhythm must be grasped, and humans must tune themselves to it. When they think that they are the doer and controller of events in life, they strike a discordant note and disturb the harmony. It is in order to erase this delusion that such passages describe the power and glory of the Supreme Being. Meditation must lead to perception of Reality, says the *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.8), ‘Since one becomes purified in mind through the favourableness of the intellect, therefore can one see that indivisible Self through meditation.’

### Fruits of Contemplation

The other major focus of the Upanishads is the nature of the individual soul. Humanity’s spiritual pursuit must have a purpose. Each sadhaka wants to know the utility of a contemplative life. There is

a deep-seated restlessness, a constant urge to unite with something, a desire to know, in every person. Even the great sage Narada laments that he is knowledgeable but devoid of the peace that comes from realization, and undergoes discipleship to learn the process of contemplation. Our essential nature being *Sat-cid-ānanda*—Existence, Awareness, Bliss Absolute, we cannot rest satisfied until we attain to that original state. Therefore, the quest after Truth and liberation from sorrow is intrinsic to us. Buffeted by the vicissitudes of life, eventually each soul seeks liberation—and the Upanishads assure us that the state of blissful Existence is attainable by everyone. The *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.1–2) depicts the identity of the individual soul with the supreme Soul and the travails of human existence as follows: ‘Two birds that are ever associated and have similar names cling to the same tree. Of these, the one eats the fruit of divergent tastes, and the other looks on without eating. On the same tree, the individual soul remains drowned, as it were, and so it moans, being worried by its impotence. When it sees thus the other, the adored Lord, and His glory, then it becomes liberated from sorrow.’ Bringing about this identity of the microcosm and the macrocosm is the theme of the Upanishads; there are many sayings that denote this. The *mahāvākyas* like *tat-tvam-asi* and *aham brahmāsmi* are the basis for realizing this identity and are aids in contemplation. Swami Gambhirananda, one of the previous presidents of the Ramakrishna Order, once pointed out in an interview that these pithy sayings are not meant for repetition like sacred mantras, but are meant to be realized. Experience of the oneness of existence is the pivotal point. Swami Vivekananda, taking his cue from such passages, defines religion as realization. The term *vijñāna* used in the Upanishads also indicates knowledge based on intuitive experience. The Upanishads boldly declare that when one attains to that state of bliss, one transcends the Vedas.

### Role Models of Contemplative Life


In order to supplement these contemplation techniques and prove their efficacy, the Upanishads de-

scribe how various individuals have achieved Self-realization. In the fourth chapter of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, there is the story of Jānaśruti Pautrāyaṇa, who was initiated into the knowledge of Brahman by Raikva. In the fifth chapter, the *pañcāgni vidyā* or science of considering one's life as a sacrifice is introduced in the conversation between Pravāhaṇa Jaivali and Śvetaketu. Such *vidyās*, found in the prominent Upanishads, deal with various identifications or upasanas and so are steps to contemplation. The seventh chapter of the same Upanishad narrates the conversation between Sanatkumāra and Nārada. Through the *bhūmā vidyā*, it is ordained that one should see the Atman in everything. An interesting episode appearing in the eighth chapter of this Upanishad contrasts the behaviour of worldly people and spiritual seekers. The god-king Indra and the demon-king Virocana become disciples of the sage Prajāpati and live a life of contemplation for thirty-two years to receive his instructions. The instruction that the Self is to be known is received by them and understood differently according to their proclivities. While Virocana takes his body to be the Self, Indra leads a contemplative life of restraint for a hundred and one years and realizes the Truth. This also proves the point that contemplation undertaken under the guidance of a suitable teacher and in keeping with the tradition alone is effective.

The Upanishads emphasise the need for sincerity in the spiritual pursuit, and stipulate that contemplative life must be supported by *tapas*—austerity, *svādhyāya*—scriptural study, *brahmacarya*—celibacy, and *vijijñāsā*—intense reflection. They categorically state that knowledge of the Supreme cannot be had by possessions, learning, or reasoning. Through the episode of Uddālaka Āruṇi's instructions to Śvetaketu, the *Chhandogya* states that humility is a prerequisite for knowledge. The *Kena Upanishad* also points out that the gods, when humbled by the Yakṣa, became receptive to spiritual instruction. *Śraddhā* as an ingredient of spiritual life is also repeatedly mentioned. Naciketā, says the *Katha Upanishad*, could contemplate on death and

transcend it because he had this faith. Therefore, a life of contemplation must have all these factors for it to be fruitful.

### The Contemplative's Expanse

According to the Upanishads, the ground of existence is one indivisible entity that is beyond sense perception but is attainable through the purified intellect; contemplation is the means to achieve this purification. We live in a fragmented world torn apart by hatred and discrimination born out of wrong identification with the ephemeral: we need to look within and find the perennial source of joy. With our hearts full of such joy, we can find ways and means to assuage the wounds that ignorance inflicts. Empty words cannot save the soul; at best, they can only console. However, the healing process must originate from within; the contemplative practices prescribed in the Upanishads are the best means to a holistic vision of life. Although we have lost much of the esoteric methodology of the upasanas, we can certainly imbibe the feeling of belongingness that the people of those days had with nature. By divinizing all relationships and by seeing ourselves as a part of a cosmic whole, our life will expand to include new frontiers and cleanse us of all dross. This is the attitude and changed perception that the world needs today. The Upanishads need to be assimilated and applied to inculcate the grandest idea that the human mind could conceive: *'yatra viśvaṁ bhavaty-eka-nīḍam*; wherein (in which state) all come to have their one home.'<sup>8</sup> 

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# Meditation and the Way of Yoga

Swami Adiswarananda

## The Problem of Suffering

LIFE in this world is not what it appears to be. It is plagued by the proverbial pairs of opposites, such as pain and pleasure, birth and death, and hope and disappointment. It is subject to the sixfold change: birth, subsistence, growth, maturity, decline, and death. Uncertainties face us at every step of life and create anxiety, fear, and hopelessness. Things do not happen according to our plans. Our optimism turns into pessimism as we grow older. Idealistic dreams of happiness and fulfilment rarely come to be true. A human individual is born crying, lives complaining, and dies disappointed. Asked by a king about the meaning of life, a sage once replied, 'A man is born, he suffers, and he dies. That is all.' The agonies of life outweigh its pleasures and promises. For the vast majority, life is a series of crises and confrontations, sorrows and sufferings.

Responses to the problem of suffering have been various. Prophetists hope that some day a prophet or an incarnation of God will be born and will usher in a golden age of peace and happiness. Fatalists cope with the problems of life, assuming them to be the decrees of fate. Transcendentalists try to withdraw from life and seek solace and serenity on the spiritual plane. Pragmatists maintain that this life is the only life we have and so we must enjoy it to the full. Progressivists believe that the advancement of science and technology will some day eliminate all evils and ills, and then there will be only good in this world. Materialists fight the ills of life solely by material means and by improving the quality of life. People of faith bear with suffering and practise religious virtues, hoping for compensation hereafter. But none of these solutions really helps us face and overcome the problem of suffering. The gold-

en age never comes. Coping with the problems of life is easier said than done. Escaping the problems of life and withdrawing into silence and solitude only frustrate a person. Pragmatists find that enjoyment is inevitably followed by sorrow. Progressivists come to realize that as we progress toward good we also progress toward evil. Materialists discover that the sufferings of life are not all physical; there are other components of suffering, mental and spiritual. People of faith hope that the rewards of the hereafter will take away the sufferings of life here on earth. But there can be no heavenly solution to our earthly problems.



*Shining in the depths of darkness*

## The Message of the Yoga Way

The yoga way responds that the ills of life are not created by an extracosmic God, by the outside world, by fate, luck, or chance. According to Yoga, there are five causes of suffering: ignorance (*avidya*), ego (*asmita*), attachment (*raga*), aversion (*dvesha*), and clinging to life (*abhinivesha*). Yoga philosophy maintains that reality has two components: Self (Purusha) and the world of matter (Prakriti). Ignorance causes the Self to forget its



**One-pointed focus**

real nature. This brings in its wake an exaggerated ego-consciousness and a deluded individuality that create attachments, aversions, and clinging to life. The root cause of suffering is the apparent embodiment of the ever-free Self and the Self getting lost in the world of matter. The world of matter, which includes the body and mind, is material and has no consciousness of its own. The consciousness of our body and mind is the borrowed consciousness of the Self. The problem of suffering is essentially spiritual and requires a spiritual solution, which is direct perception of our divine Self.

The yoga system tells us that the natural tendency of the human mind is toward Self-realization. The master urge of a human individual is not sex-gratification or acquisition of power or wealth but desire for unbounded joy, unrestricted awareness, and eternal life. All our struggles and toils are a search for the fulfillment of this desire, which is attained when we get established in the Self.

The journey to Self-realization is essentially an inward journey—through the layers of our mind, through the wilderness of temptations, desires, attachments, and delusions. According to the way of yoga, the Self is like the bottom of a lake, which is the mind. The waters of the lake are constantly agitated, creating various waves. We do not perceive the bottom because of the waves. The tendency of the lake is to return to tranquillity, but it remains agitated due to the impurities and distractions of the mind in the forms of desire for sense pleasure, attachment to the results of action, and accumulated bad habits and tendencies, created by ignorance,

delusion, and spiritual blackout.

**Meditation according to the Yoga Way**

The only way to overcome the maladies of life is to re-establish contact with the Self, and the only way to make contact with the Self is through uninterrupted meditation. Meditation calls for the rise of the whole mind in concentration on the Self; concentration depends upon strict self-control; and self-control depends upon spiritual awakening and withdrawal of the mind from all its attachments, desires, and samskaras (deep-seated habits and tendencies). The step leading to meditation is one-pointed concentration. Such concentration does not develop by itself. It has to be practised consciously and regularly. The obstacles to concentration are the drags of old samskaras.

Generally speaking, there are four ways to overcome the drag of the samskaras and establish contact with the Self: the ways of persuasion, purification, eradication, and confrontation.

The way of persuasion tries to convince us by reason, discrimination, and self-analysis that our real identity is not the body and mind but the Self. By hearing about the Self, reading about the Self, thinking about the Self, and meditating on the Self, the mind gradually realizes that the Self is the only reality in this universe and that all else is unreal.

The way of purification says that our self-love blocks our mind from becoming absorbed in thoughts of God. We must purify this self-love by pouring holy thoughts into our mind and transferring all our love to God through prayer, worship, chanting of holy words, and keeping holy company. When such holy thoughts are poured into the mind, all unholy and impure thoughts are naturally washed out.

The way of eradication of desires seeks to purify the mind through selfless action, which eradicates the ego. It is the ego, born of ignorance, that binds us to this world through attachment and separates us from the Self. By performing actions in a selfless manner, we can break down the barriers that separate us from the Self.

Patanjali's yoga system advocates the way of confrontation. The yoga way contends that eradication of the ego is a long process, and that most seekers do not have the patience to endure the sacrifice it calls for. Purification requires abiding faith in the reality of God, which is not always possible for an average seeker. And the mind is generally too weak and perverted to follow the path of persuasion. Impurities of the mind are too deeply imbedded and cannot be uprooted simply by reason. The way of confrontation asks the seeker to confront the mind and make relentless efforts to overcome its past habits and tendencies. The seeker must have unwavering determination and will-power to reach the goal of Self-realization. The goal is never attained unless we make an all-out effort for it. The essential teaching of yoga is that the mind never becomes controlled unless we consciously control the effects of the mind's restlessness—and not only the cause of restlessness.

The psychology of the yoga way says that the greatest roadblock to Self-realization is restlessness of the mind. The mind is material, and its conditionings of impurities are mechanical. It is most difficult to know the nature, depth, and extent of these impurities. All we know is that the mind is restless and that restlessness is manifesting itself in our restless body movement, unevenness of breath, and changes in biochemistry. This restlessness is more than disturbing thought. Thoughts, when repeated, become ingrained and turn into deep-seated tendencies (*samskaras*). Passage of time and change of environment are of no help in overcoming our restless habits. Old age cannot lessen their fury and distance cannot obliterate them. Unfavourable *samskaras* do not go away by themselves. The technique of overcoming unfavourable habits is the deliberate cultivation of favourable habits. Bad *samskaras* are overcome only by good *samskaras*. As Swami Vivekananda says, commenting on Patanjali's yoga: "The only remedy for bad habits is counter-habits; all the bad habits that have left their impressions are to be controlled by good habits. Go on doing good, thinking holy thoughts continuously; that is the only way to suppress base



*A limitless flight*

impressions. Never say any man is hopeless, because he only represents a character, a bundle of habits, which can be checked by new and better ones. Character is repeated habits, and repeated habits alone can reform character."<sup>1</sup>

The distinctive contribution of yoga is its message that control of the mind must be effortful and forcible, and to that end the yoga system prescribes an eightfold practice.

The first five limbs of the eightfold practice are external practices, the last three, internal ones. The first two limbs are *yama* and *niyama* for achieving moral purity. The practices of non-killing, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-receiving of gifts constitute *yama*. The practices of internal and external purification, contentment, mortification, study, and worship of God constitute *niyama*. The third limb is *asana*, which comprises directions for posture in order to gain mastery over the body. Posture that is steady, with the limbs of the body restful, is conducive for concentration and meditation. The fourth limb, *pranayama*, is the control of breath, by which a person seeks to awaken the mind. Pranayama is the retention of breath (*kumbhaka*)—following either inhalation (*puraka*) or exhalation (*rechaka*). The life force (*prana*) in each of us is a manifestation of the cosmic life force, and our breath is the gross manifestation of that cosmic life force, which is ever awake and ever active in us. Pranayama is the way to reconnect ourselves with the cosmic life force. The fifth limb is *praty-*

*hara*, or the practice of withdrawing the mind from sense objects. The sixth limb is *dharana*, concentration, which is keeping the mind focused on an object for a certain length of time without interruption. The seventh limb is *dhyana*, or meditation on one single thought to the exclusion of all other thoughts. The eighth limb is *samadhi*, when the mind becomes completely absorbed in the object of meditation. The eightfold practice is a practice for attaining samadhi through proper concentration and meditation. According to the tradition of yoga, focusing the mind on the same object for twelve seconds achieves one unit of concentration; twelve such units of concentration (two minutes and twenty-four seconds) make one unit of meditation; twelve such successive units of meditation (twenty-eight minutes and forty-eight seconds) make one unit of lower samadhi; twelve such successive units of lower samadhi (five hours, forty-five minutes and thirty-six seconds) lead the meditator to highest samadhi, where the individual consciousness becomes one with the Self.

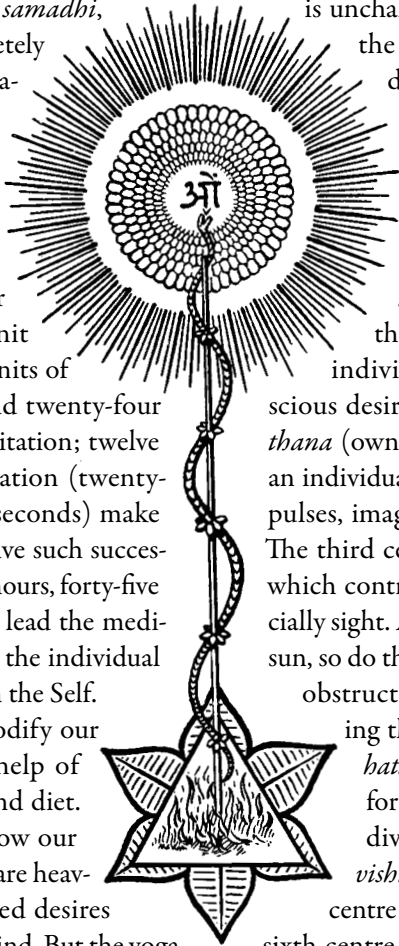
The yoga system seeks to modify our subconscious mind with the help of regulation of breath, posture, and diet. Modern psychology explains how our conscious thoughts and actions are heavily influenced by the deep-seated desires and urges of our subconscious mind. But the yoga system further shows us how we can modify our subconscious mind by the efforts of our conscious mind, how repeated exercises of the will on the conscious level can influence the subconscious depths and modify them permanently. By controlling the manifested effects of impurities, the yoga system seeks to eliminate the source of the impurities and regain contact with the true Self in meditation.

### **Awakening of Inner Consciousness**

Following the eightfold practice, consciousness of

the mind is raised upward. In this regard, the yoga system speaks of the six centres of consciousness. The awakened kundalini (spiritual energy dormant in every person) rises and passes through centres of consciousness located in the vicinity of the spinal column. For ordinary persons, the spiritual energy is unchannelled and squandered. Through the practice of yoga disciplines, this dormant energy is converted into spiritual energy (*ojas*). The six centres of consciousness range from the lowest plane of gross impulses to the highest plane of pure bliss. The first centre is called *muladhara* (root support). Dwelling on this level of consciousness, a human individual is guided by gross, subconscious desires. The second centre is *svadhisthana* (own abode). Remaining at this centre, an individual is constantly swayed by gross impulses, imagination, and animal propensities. The third centre is *manipura* (city of jewels), which controls the senses of perception, especially sight. As clouds obstruct the vision of the sun, so do the clouds of emotions and impulses obstruct the clear vision of the Self. Raising the mind to the fourth centre, *anahata* (unobstructed), a spiritual seeker for the first time gets a glimpse of the divine Self. The fifth centre is called *vishuddha* (pure), and existence at this centre is marked by complete purity. The sixth centre is known as *ajna* (command). By reaching this centre of consciousness, a seeker attains the vision of absolute Truth.

Through the practice of meditation, the inner consciousness becomes awakened. The awakening of the first centre activates the memories of our past; the second, gross impulses; and the third, a sense of individuality. The awakening of the fourth centre brings spiritual experiences and visions; the fifth, partial spiritual absorption; and the sixth, deep spiritual absorption. For most persons, the mind is forced to travel between the three lower





centres. At these centres, a person's mind constantly broods over the cravings of lust and greed; eating, sleeping, and procreation are a person's dominant preoccupations. But when the mind reaches the fourth centre, seekers experience spiritual awakening. New vistas open up before them—they see the same world but in its fine and spiritual form; they see light all around and visualize the individual soul as a flame. When their minds reach the fifth centre, they want to talk and hear only about God and do not enjoy anything else. Reaching the sixth centre, their minds are taken over by a deep spiritual absorption, and they see the Self as living and real. They lose all outer consciousness and no longer want to come back to the level of body consciousness.

### **Methodology of the Yoga Way**

The psychology behind the practice of meditation in yoga is to feed a single thought to the mind and make the mind repeat that thought in a methodical and persistent way. Meditation is the practice of deliberately concentrating on one single thought, which in time develops into a huge wave of that thought and drowns all other thoughts of the mind. Swami Vivekananda says:

What is the result of constant practice of this higher concentration? All old tendencies of restlessness and dullness will be destroyed, as well as the tendencies of goodness too. The case is similar to that of the chemicals used to take the dirt and alloy off gold. When the ore is smelted down, the dross is burnt along with the chemicals. So this constant controlling power will stop the previous bad tendencies, and eventually, the good ones also. Those good and evil tendencies will suppress each other, leaving alone the Soul, in its own splendour, untrammelled by either good or bad, the omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient (1.213).

The yoga system reminds us that there are two tendencies in every individual that operate simultaneously: one is the will to attachment, the other is the will to freedom. The will to freedom, according to Patanjali, is natural in every individual; the will



*The dawn of the full moon in the realm of Consciousness*

to attachment is a kind of perversion. The way of yoga is to cultivate and strengthen this will to freedom by the conscious practice of meditation.

The state of *kaivalya*, or final liberation in yoga, results from perfect knowledge, and the keynote of perfect knowledge is perfect non-attachment. Perfect non-attachment is attained through undeviating practice of the eight-limbed yoga. Patanjali stresses three vital points on the practice of yoga: practice must be steady and unbroken; practice must be without attachment to the result; and practice must be conducted with undaunted enthusiasm and devotion.

### **Contentions of the Critics**

Critics of the yoga way cast doubt on the very psychology of yoga. They tell us that we cannot generate spirituality by artificial means. The impure mind cannot be made pure by posture, diet, and breath control. Thoughts and urges cannot be overcome by superficial, physical means. Some critics say that one must control the gross manifestations of the restless mind by first controlling the subtle, which is thought. One must first educate and discipline the intellect in order to overcome the mind and the body, instead of disciplining the mind and the body for the purpose of educating the intellect. Withdrawal of the mind is not possible unless the mind cooperates in the process. Forcible control can rouse the mind untimely, before spiritual longing has matured and spiritual motivation has become



*Towards the light of Consciousness*

strong. A roused mind without longing for the goal is self-destructive. The mind of a seeker practising meditation and concentration for a length of time becomes razor sharp and highly sensitive. Such a concentrated mind may easily take a sudden and extreme downward turn. Unable to curb sharp turns of the mind toward sense pleasures, some seekers meet with a violent fall in the path.


Other critics contend that seekers of yoga are susceptible to taking a mechanical view of the spiritual disciplines they follow. Such seekers forget their primary goal and become obsessed with the secondary details. They believe that eating a certain kind of food, sitting in a particular posture, and breathing in a specific way will lead them to Self-realization. They become fanatical about their dogma, pose, and posture, and feel frustrated when the desired results are not attained quickly. A mechanical view of meditation defeats the very purpose of yoga. It reduces spiritual realization to something that can be attained by closing one's eyes and sitting in a certain way.

### **The Appeal of the Yoga Way**

No matter what the critics say, the yoga system has an irresistible appeal because of its well-defined goal, well-marked steps and stages, precise and definite milestones on the path, and realistic solutions to the ills of life. It does not ask a person to look to the sky for solutions to the ills of life, but teaches a person to look within to find answers. The philoso-

phy of yoga is scientific, therapeutic, practical, and problem-solving. The guidelines to reach the goal of Self-realization are never vague, and Self-realization carries its own credentials. The manifestation of yoga powers generates confidence in the mind of the seeker as to the infallibility of yoga, and the concentrated, purified energy (*ojas*) gives the seeker strength to strive towards the goal.

The way of yoga is a relentless quest for our true Self, which remains buried under the covers of our body and mind, our countless thoughts and memories, emotions and volitions, habits and tendencies. Direct perception of this Self alone can unravel the mysteries of life and decisively put an end to all the maladies of life. This direct perception is our true saviour, and our own effort is our only tool to attain direct perception. The yoga way exhorts us to wake up to this fact, hasten our steps, and attain our goal, because life is terminal and the future is unknown. Our fate and future depend on this quest for Self-realization. Extolling the efficacy of yoga, Swami Vivekananda says: 'The fire of Yoga burns the cage of sin that is around a man. Knowledge becomes purified and Nirvana is directly obtained. From Yoga comes knowledge; knowledge again helps the Yogi. He who combines in himself both Yoga and knowledge, with him the Lord is pleased. Those that practise Mahayoga, either once a day, or twice a day, or thrice, or always, know them to be gods' (1.189). 'Practise hard; whether you live or die does not matter. You have to plunge in and work, without thinking of the result. If you are brave enough, in six months you will be a perfect Yogi' (1.178).

Those who are determined in their effort, steadfast in their practice of self-control and renunciation, well established in the virtues of *yama* and *niyama* (especially continence), undeterred by the obstacles and risks, and ready to follow the path, attain the goal of Self-realization in no time. This is the promise of the way of yoga. 

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# Preparations for the Contemplative Life

Swami Gokulananda

**H**UMAN life is precious. The soul is born in the human body after it has passed through millions of life-cycles of lesser and inferior forms. But as human beings, divinity is inherent in us. We are never eternally doomed, because the eternal spirit is undying. Swami Vivekananda has said: 'The main cause of all bondage is ignorance. Man is not wicked by his own nature—not at all. His nature is pure, perfectly holy. Each man is divine. Each man that you see is a God by his very nature. This nature is covered by ignorance, and it is ignorance that binds us down. Ignorance is the cause of all misery. Ignorance is the cause of all wickedness; and knowledge will make the world good.'<sup>1</sup> We may temporarily remain forgetful of our true nature, our divinity, but it remains within. This is illustrated perfectly in the Chhandogya Upanishad: A miserly man had buried all his treasure underground. When he died, his inheritor walked over that treasure every now and then, never realizing the existence of the treasure.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, we have got the whole treasure, and yet we are walking over it, never knowing that it is there. What we need is to become aware of our true self, our Atman, and awaken the consciousness of Satchidananda—the indwelling spirit which is behind everything. Once we have heard the inner call, we should not let this precious human life go in vain. No doubt, there will be ups and downs in our spiritual journey, but that should not deter us from pursuing our goal. With a strong determination and a positive attitude, and by rigorously following the path prescribed by the sages in our ancient scriptures, we can transcend the limitations of this material existence and achieve immortality. There may be pitfalls in the journey, there may be roadblocks in our quest, but the voice of conscience or buddhi will guide us like

the Pole Star. If we listen to our buddhi, our compass, it will help us steer clear of all dangers, difficulties, and temptations that may come in the way, and reach the 'goal supreme'. By repeated practice, we must build up a nobler personality. We have to employ a method to transform our inferior self and raise it to superior level.

Our journey may be a hard struggle, but let us remember what our ancient rishis point out: errors or mistakes occur when our buddhi descends to a lower level. The psyche, the *antahkaraṇa*, therefore, needs absolute purification. In most of us, the *antahkaraṇa* is not pure. It is surcharged with impurities of both *rajas* and *tamas*, so we have to take pains to purify it. As Sri Ramakrishna says, we must take the help of one thorn to remove another thorn stuck in our foot, and then throw away both thorns. So we must ourselves generate pure and sublime thoughts in our mind; with the help of such ennobling thoughts we have to rise above the realm of thought, and ultimately we shall be able to have direct experience. It is said that 'today's imagination is tomorrow's realization'. As we think, so we become. So thinking noble thoughts, thinking we are perfect, will help us proceed towards the goal supreme. As Swami Vivekananda says, 'The aim, the end, the goal, of all this training is liberation of the soul. Absolute control of nature, and nothing short of it, must be the goal. We must be the masters, and not the slaves of nature; neither body nor mind must be our master, nor must we forget that the body is mine, and not I the body's.'<sup>3</sup>

Meditation plays an important role in this process of purification and realization. In the words of Swami Vivekananda: 'It is the nearest approach to spiritual life—the mind meditating. It is the one moment in our daily life that we are not at all mate-

## Prayer

Mentally repeat, 'Let all beings be happy; let all beings be peaceful; let all beings be blissful.' So do to the east, south, north and west. The more you do that the better you will feel yourself. You will find at last that the easiest way to make ourselves healthy is to see that others are healthy, and the easiest way to make ourselves happy is to see that others are happy. After doing that, those who believe in God should pray—not for money, not for health, nor for heaven; pray for knowledge and light; every other prayer is selfish.

—Swami Vivekananda

rial—the soul thinking of Itself, free from all matter—this marvellous touch of the Soul!' (5.253). In this we are helped by our *iṣṭa devatā*, our Chosen Deity; we meditate not only on the physical form but also on the radiant form of the *iṣṭa*. Since the mind is by nature restless, at times it may be useful to do *līlā cintana*, dwelling in our imagination on the events and places associated with the divine play of our Chosen Deity. A combination of japa, meditation, and *līlā cintana* at least for some part of the day will elevate our mind and enable us to feel the living presence of the Lord within. In the course of the various activities of day-to-day life, we are apt to be drawn to the attractions of the empirical world unless we keep our mind on our *iṣṭa devatā*. So those who are serious about reaching the goal supreme in this life itself should try to withdraw their minds from all objects of form, taste, touch, sound, and smell, at least for some time every day. Let us recall what Sri Ramakrishna says on the subject: 'A person can achieve such single-mindedness in meditation that he will see nothing, hear nothing. He will not be conscious even of touch. A snake may crawl over his body, but he will not know it. Neither of them will be aware of the other.'

'In deep meditation the sense organs stop functioning; the mind does not look outward. It is like closing the gate of the outer court in a house. There

are five objects of the senses: form, taste, smell, touch, and sound. They are all left outside.'<sup>4</sup>

## Four Limbs of Sadhana

Let us now examine how we can develop that inward vision with which we can penetrate false appearances and reach Reality. We have to discharge all worldly duties and yet develop mental detachment and real dispassion for things of the external world. For this, we have to practise the fourfold sadhana or *sādhana catuṣṭaya*: *viveka*, *vairāgya*, *śat-sampatti*, and *mumukṣutva*: discrimination, dispassion, the six (spiritual) assets, and longing for liberation. Viveka will teach us to discriminate between the real and the unreal. In spiritual or contemplative life we must develop the attitude that nothing in this world except God-realization can give us lasting happiness. Once we develop viveka or right discrimination, we will develop dispassion or vairagya: vairagya comes from viveka. Next, we need the *śat-sampatti*—the aggregate of six virtues, namely *śama*, *dama*, *titikṣā*, *uparati*, *śraddhā*, and *samādhāna*. The foremost of these is *śama*, tranquillity of the mind. We must strive to keep our mind at peace even when external forces or factors are trying to agitate it. *Dama*, sense-control, comes next: we must restrain the senses, like a charioteer who restrains restive horses. Then there is *titikṣā*: we have to keep calm and remain unperturbed, come what may. The practice of *uparati* will help us to bring back the mind that has a tendency to run away and drag us into the external world every now and then. Of great importance is *śraddhā*, faith and confidence in our guru, in our scriptures, and also in our own selves. Lastly, we need *samādhāna* or single-minded devotion. Only when we have viveka, vairagya, and the aggregate of the six virtues will we be qualified for leading a contemplative life; then can we hope to realize the ultimate goal. But we must remember that success in practising these sadhanas depends on *mumukṣutva*, the desire to free ourselves from bondage and achieve realization. This desire should be like the flame of an ever-burning lamp which guides us in all our

activities. If we really want liberation in this very life, then we must be careful, vigilant, and alert at every moment, and continuously attempt to hold on to Brahman-consciousness—we must cultivate *brahma-niṣṭhā*. We must believe that we are Brahman, that we are Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. We must be aware of our inherent divine nature and continuously strive to keep our mind on Brahman. In the *Vivekachudamani*, Shankaracharya warns that as the moss or sedge covering a pond, even when moved aside, does not stay away for long, but covers the water up in a moment, so maya or nescience also covers the mind of a wise man. Hence, even a wise man cannot escape the clutches of Mahamaya if he is not alert. In the next verse, Shankaracharya says: '*Lakṣyacyutam cedyadi cittamīṣad-bahirmukham sannipatet-tatastataḥ, pramādataḥ pracyutakelikandukah sopānapaṅktau patito yathā tathā*; If the mind ever so slightly strays away from the ideal and becomes outgoing, then it goes down and down, just as a playing ball inadvertently dropped on a staircase bounces down from one step to another.'<sup>5</sup> The remedy lies in practising vairagya and cultivating *brahma-niṣṭhā*. The mind should be withdrawn from everything that is non-Atman. But since the mind cannot remain in limbo or in a vacuum if it is withdrawn from the non-Atman, we must also develop *bodha* or true understanding along with vairagya. Shankaracharya describes Vairagya and bodha as being like the two wings of a bird. A bird cannot soar in the sky with one wing only, so one must have two things: vairagya or detachment, and bodha or true understanding of our real divine nature.

Pursuit of spiritual life and attainment of the goal supreme calls for rigorous practice or sadhana. We have to plod on and on until the goal is reached. The aforementioned fourfold sadhanas are like the four legs of a table: as all the four legs have to be strong for the table to function well, so each of the fourfold sadhanas has to be practised to achieve the goal. But, only when one has *mumukṣutva*, the real desire for liberation, will one's sadhana become fruitful. It often happens that people begin prepara-

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## The First Lesson

The first lesson, then, is to sit for some time and let the mind run on. The mind is bubbling up all the time. It is like that monkey jumping about. Let the monkey jump as much as he can; you simply wait and watch. Knowledge is power, says the proverb, and that is true. Until you know what the mind is doing you cannot control it. Give it the rein; many hideous thoughts may come into it; you will be astonished that it was possible for you to think such thoughts. But you will find that each day the mind's vagaries are becoming less and less violent, that each day it is becoming calmer.

—Swami Vivekananda

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tions for a contemplative life in all earnestness, in all seriousness, but as days pass by and the struggle begins, their initial urge and enthusiasm slowly evaporates. Only those who have the real urge for liberation will carry on with their sadhana come what may. Shankaracharya explains: '*Vairāgyam ca mumukṣutvam tīvram yasya tu vidyate, tasminn-evārthavantaḥ syuh phalavantaḥ śamādayaḥ*'; Only in the case of one whose renunciation and yearning for freedom are intense, do calmness and the other practices really become fruitful' (29).

## What Is Renunciation?

Swami Vivekananda repeatedly emphasized the importance of renunciation. He greatly respected and admired Buddha—Buddha's renunciation of kingdom, wealth, and family in his search for absolute truth and the way to free human beings from suffering and misery had been an inspiration to Swamiji. But we must also bear in mind the distinction between external and internal renunciation. In external renunciation, one renounces the world and retires to the cave or the forest: but such renunciation is of no use if one does not renounce internally, if one still has cravings, desires, and attachment for sense objects. Only when such external renunciation is followed by total internal renunciation will one be successful in one's spiritual quest.

## Be Like a Pearl Oyster

There is a pretty Indian fable to the effect that if it rains when the star Svati is in the ascendant, and a drop of rain falls into an oyster, that drop becomes a pearl. The oysters know this, so they come to the surface when that star shines, and wait to catch the precious raindrop. When a drop falls into them, quickly the oysters close their shells and dive down to the bottom of the sea, there to patiently develop the drop into the pearl. We should be like that. First hear, then understand, and then, leaving all distractions, shut your minds to outside influences, and devote yourselves to developing the truth within you.

—Swami Vivekananda

Once in Dakshineswar, a householder devotee asked Sri Ramakrishna whether a householder can realize God without complete renunciation. Sri Ramakrishna, who was the embodiment of compassion and mercy, replied with words of assurance: ‘Of course you can! Why should you renounce everything? You are all right as you are, following the middle path ... I tell you the truth: there is nothing wrong in your being in the world. But you must direct your mind toward God; otherwise you will not succeed. Do your duty with one hand and with the other hold to God. After the duty is over, you will hold to God with both hands.’<sup>6</sup> Our quest for spiritual life can only succeed if it is built on the foundation of viveka and vairagya. Even then it is going to be a difficult struggle. Disappointment and frustration at not achieving the desired progress are bound to creep in. But the secret is not to lose heart. In this connection I must narrate what Swami Prabhavananda, a very venerable monk of the Order and a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, told me: ‘When we were novitiates, we would tell Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) about our difficulties. Then he would say that everyone has to pass through such struggles; do not lose heart, do not give up the struggle.’ If we give up the struggle, there is no further hope. But if we keep up the struggle, then

even if we fail, we can rise again.

We who take to the spiritual path will be up against different kinds of inner conflicts, but if we continue with the struggle, keeping in mind our divine nature, then ultimately we will reach our goal. For this, we have to develop voluntary spiritual discipline. There is no denying that we are subject to all sorts of desires—but instead of forcibly suppressing them, we should try to sublimate them. Voluntary spiritual discipline will help us to give these desires a godward direction. We can constantly remind ourselves that, according to Vedanta, the external world means five things: *nāma* (name), *rūpa* (form), *asti*, *bhāti*, and *priya* (existence, knowledge, and bliss). If we eliminate name and form, then we can perceive the omnipresence of Brahman—*asti*, *bhāti*, *priya*—Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss Absolute. What follows is the natural corollary that all of us are part of the same pure consciousness, that the difference between us is just in the name and form. This is the truth that our ancient rishis discovered in their transcendental realization, and that we have to keep in mind constantly. In our daily life, even when we are not practising japa or meditation, we have to keep up our *vicāra* or discrimination and remember that *nāma* and *rūpa* are nothing but external coverings. If we can maintain that attitude then we shall see the entire universe to be pervaded by the omnipresent Brahman—the substratum—*sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*.

Sometimes we try to forcibly achieve mastery over the mind and establish control over the senses. But this should not be mistaken for inner transformation. Inner transformation, according to the Gita, will not be complete if we have only external control of the mind. What is needed is internal control. Sri Krishna says: ‘*Viṣayā vinivartante nīrāhārasya dehinaḥ, rasa-varjaṁ raso’py-asya param dīṣtvā nivartate*; Sense-objects turn away from the embodied soul who abstains from feeding on them, but the taste for them remains. Even the taste falls away when the Supreme is seen.’<sup>7</sup> The difference between outer abstinence and inner control has been very clearly brought out in this verse. While we may be



able to shun or reject sense-objects, desires may still be lurking in our mind to possess those very objects. To be successful in our journey, we must have both external and inner control.

### Fighting Obstacles in Meditation

Finally, a few words on the importance of japa and meditation. Many people report that when they sit down for meditation, impure thoughts flood their mind. We must remember that the mind has many layers—conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. Very often undesirable thoughts arise from the subconscious layers of the mind. If such undesirable thoughts assail us during the course of meditation, we should not lose heart. Instead, we have to focus our attention on japa sadhana, on repetition of the mantra—the sacred name that one has received from one's guru or spiritual master. When a true spiritual master initiates a disciple, power is transmitted to the disciple through the mantra. We also need the help of our own Chosen Deity or *iṣṭa devatā*. We have to learn from a competent spiritual master how to meditate on our *iṣṭa deva*. If we have a Chosen Deity and a *siddha bīja mantra* (perfected mantra), then we have a definite centre of spiritual consciousness to hold on to. Japa becomes efficacious when, along with the repetition of the divine name, we dwell on its meaning as instructed by the teacher. It is said in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, '*Taj-japas-tad-artha bhāvanam*', which means that we are to be constantly conscious of the spiritual significance of the mantra. In the beginning, repeating the mantra may seem mechanical, but with passage of time and with practice it will create a sublime and exalted feeling. Evil and undesirable thoughts are bound to creep into our conscious minds; the remedy lies in doing japa sadhana with diligence and perseverance.


### Eternally Free

In conclusion, let us remind ourselves that human birth is a rare opportunity. It should not be wasted only in pursuit of things which are transient, which are not everlasting. Our goal should be to

### Concentration and Detachment

Almost all of our suffering is caused by our not having the power of detachment. So along with the development of concentration we must develop the power of detachment. We must learn not only to attach the mind to one thing exclusively, but also to detach it at a moment's notice and place it on something else. These two should be developed together to make it safe.

—Swami Vivekananda

realize our real Self. That alone can give us everlasting peace and happiness. As Swamiji said, 'What, seeketh thou the pleasures of the world?—He is the fountain of all bliss. Seek for the highest, aim at that highest, and you *shall* reach the highest.'<sup>8</sup> If we really aspire for the joyful state of existence, then we must retire into the inner world of contemplation, and develop detachment and dispassion while doing our worldly duties. Practice of the fourfold sadhana and japa sadhana will make us realize that we are eternally free, that we are *sat-cit-ānanda-svarūpa*, that we are pure Consciousness. When we reach this state, we will realize that we are free—eternal, imperishable, birthless, and deathless. 

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You have to practise spiritual disciplines in such a way that no matter what your circumstances may be you will follow your regular routine. Once the mind tastes sweetness in the thought of God there is nothing to fear. —Swami Brahmananda

# Japa: Instrument of Love for God's Name

Swami Tathagatananda

JAPA is repetition of the mantra, holy word or words, according to prescribed rules, with concentration, devotion, and the sole intention of realizing the truth embodied in the mantra. Sri Ramakrishna says:

Japa means silently repeating God's name in solitude. When you chant His name with single-minded devotion you can see God's form and realize Him. Suppose there is a piece of timber sunk in the water of the Ganges and fastened with a chain to the bank. You proceed link by link, holding to the chain, and you dive into the water and follow the chain. Finally, you are able to reach the timber. In the same way, by repeating God's name you become absorbed in Him and finally realize Him.<sup>1</sup>

The mantra is a mass of effulgent energy, the sound-body symbolizing the supreme Truth.

**Om is shabda-brahman, 'Brahman in the form of sound':** The Veda says, 'Creation is out of the Supreme Sound.' Om is the Supreme Sound, the sound-symbol of God. Patanjali refers to Om as the symbol of Ishvara or personal God: '*Tasya vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ*, His manifesting word is Om.'<sup>2</sup>

Swami Vivekananda says: 'Ishvara is the Atman as seen or grasped by the mind. His highest name is Om; so repeat it, meditate on it, and think of all its wonderful nature and attributes. Repeating the Om continually is the only true worship. It is not a word, it is God Himself.'<sup>3</sup>

**Japa is a means to Self-realization:** Repetition of the mantra awakens the potency contained within the mantra. According to Patanjali, regular repetition of Om leads to the awakening of the Self: '*Tajjapas-tad-artha-bhāvanam*; The repetition of this (Om) and meditating on its meaning (is the way).'<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the mental and emo-

tional components of japa are equally significant. Japa gradually advances to meditation, which unfolds deeper layers of consciousness. The emphasis is on *bhāvanam*, 'dwelling upon in the mind'. When the mind dwells upon God with devotion, japa draws the individual soul to the Paramatman naturally.

The power of the mantra manifests when the guru is competent, when the mantra is correctly articulated, and when the aspirant reflects deeply on its meaning. Swami Vivekananda says: 'Mantra is a special word, or sacred text, or name of God chosen by the Guru for repetition and reflection by the disciple. The disciple must concentrate on a personality for prayer and praise, and that is his Ish-ta. These words are not sounds of words but God Himself, and we have them within us. Think of Him, speak of Him. No desire for the world! Buddha's Sermon on the Mount was, "As thou thinkest, so art thou."<sup>5</sup>

The spiritual vibrations generated by repeating the holy name wholeheartedly with faith evoke spiritual emotion that purifies the mind and heart. They reveal to us the vision of our *iṣṭa devatā* and our indivisible unity with God and his name. Vivekananda says, 'Each Ishta has a Mantra. The Ishta is the ideal peculiar to the particular worshipper; the Mantra is the external word to express it. Constant repetition of the word helps to fix the ideal firmly in the mind'(7.63).

**Mantra-śakti, the liberating power of the mantra:** When sincerely reflected upon, the mantra has the sacred power, the *mantra-śakti*, to liberate. The literal meaning of 'mantra' is '*mananāt trāyate iti*, that which frees the soul when reflected upon.' The mantra protects us from psychophysical, moral, and spiritual dangers. Salvation is certain for one



who meditates on the mantra with burning faith in *mantra-sakti*.

### **Japa in the Lives of the Holy Ones**

Many saints and sages of India and other countries attained God by repeating his holy name. If they did not claim God-realization, they testified to the efficacy of God's name to illumine their understanding. Swami Vivekananda says: 'We can now understand what is meant by repetition. It is the greatest stimulus that can be given to the spiritual Samskaras [sum total of impressions in the mind]. "One moment of company with the holy makes a ship to cross this ocean of life"' (1.220).

A spiritual environment is very important, especially for beginners. Sri Ramakrishna taught his disciples: 'There is God's manifestation where people have practised for a long time austerities, Japa, meditation, steady abstraction of mind, prayer, and worship in order to have His vision. Their thoughts of God have become solidified there, so to speak, on account of their devotion; that is why holy thoughts and visions are so easily attained there.'<sup>6</sup>

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi placed the greatest emphasis on daily japa and meditation: 'The mind will be steadied of itself if aspirants repeat God's name fifteen or twenty thousand times a day. I myself have experienced it.'<sup>7</sup> She conveyed the efficacy of japa through her own austere practice of it, which she did for the good of her disciples. Remembering this gives us great encouragement and faith in the guru who transmits the holy name.

Mahatma Gandhi, a votary of Ramanama, realized the spiritual benefit of japa in his life and dying breath. Rama was enthroned in his heart as 'the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God.'<sup>8</sup> Gandhiji made the mantra the verification of his life.

Without any intellectual knowledge about the mantra and its potentiality, millions of people over the centuries in all countries have been repeating the divine name in their inner heart and experiencing peace and enlightenment.

**One must be** completely absorbed in whatever *mantra* one selects. One should not mind if other thoughts disturb one during the *japa* (recitation). I am confident that one who still goes on with the *japa* in faith will conquer in the end. The *mantra* becomes one's staff of life and carries one through every ordeal. One should not seek worldly profit from such sacred *mantras*. The characteristic power of these *mantras* lies in their standing guard over personal purity, and every diligent seeker will realize this at once.

Each repetition ... has a new meaning, each repetition carries you nearer and nearer to God. This is a concrete fact, and I may tell you that you are here talking to no theorist, but to one who has experienced what he says every minute of his life, so much so that it is easier for the life to stop than for this incessant process to stop. It is a definite need of the soul.

—Mahatma Gandhi

### **Japa in Hinduism and Buddhism**

Though all religions prescribe some variation of japa of the holy name using various types of rosaries (seeds, wooden beads, crystals, and the like), this practice is predominant in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the *mālā* is often made of sacred rudraksha or tulasi beads. Tibetan Buddhists practise revolving the wheel of japa and repeating the mantra *Om mani padme hum*. Japanese Buddhists of the Nichiren sect study and repeat the mantra of Nichiren's sutra of the 'Lotus of Truth', *Namu myōho renge kyo*, as the sole means to liberation. Householders of that tradition repeat the mantra alone.

Japa is prescribed by nearly every Hindu sect as a valuable spiritual practice. In the Bhagavadgita, Sri Krishna says to Arjuna, '*Yajñānām japayajño'smi*'; Among all the yajnas or sacrifices, I am the yajna of japa, the repetition of the Lord's name.'<sup>9</sup>

The holy name enshrined in the divinely-charged mantra, when uttered with devotion, brings forth spiritual sensitivity through its calming influence.

With the lower nature subdued and the higher consciousness reached, all nature is seen as Divine Consciousness.

### **The Holy Name in Judaism and Christianity**

Hebrew prophets recognize the omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence of God by declaring, 'The Lord is His Name.'<sup>10</sup> '*Shema Yisrael, Adonai elohaynu, Adonai echad*; Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,' is a traditional Hebrew prayer. Hebrews and Christians adore God with many descriptive metaphors—holy, everlasting, almighty, excellent. The names Lord, Beloved, Shepherd, Shield, Horn of my Salvation, High Tower, Refuge, Saviour, Rock, Sanctuary, Counsellor, and Father are found throughout the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the Psalms. The Psalmist says, 'Let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee'; 'For our heart shall rejoice in him because we have trusted in his holy name'; 'O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together'; 'I will praise thy name, O Lord, for it is good'; and 'So will not we go back from thee: quicken us and we will call upon thy name.'<sup>11</sup> Jesus says: 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'<sup>12</sup>

Christians practise prayers of praise inspired by verses from the Bible, and Roman Catholics recite the Hail Mary and Our Father prayers on the rosary. In the well-known book *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the Russian monk began earnestly repeating the prayer 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me' three thousand, then six thousand, and then twelve thousand times a day. He became immensely fulfilled inwardly by reaching the 'unceasing activity of the heart', and thus achieved success in spiritual life.

### **Japa in Islam, Sufism, Zoroastrianism, and Sikhism**

Sufi mystics have always regarded the repetition of the name of Allah as the highest form of worship. Some say that intoning the dhikr, '*la ilaha illallah*; There is no God but God, there is none save He', is superior to observing the five daily prayers

of Islam. Al Ghazali (1058–1111) says: 'The devotee begins by repeating the name. Then the tongue should cease moving and the name be repeated in the mind only. Finally, all forms should go and only the idea remain. At this point the devotee should lay himself open to God's mercy. The highest ecstasy is produced by dhikr. The ultimate stage is to be completely absorbed in God forgetting even the act of thinking of God.'

Sufis repeat the holy name until they perceive God and attain to ecstasy: 'O Lord, I ever remember Thy Name, I offer my life to Thee, teach me Thy secret mystery', says Bullah Shah (1680–1752). He continues, 'Very sweet is the Name of the Lord, and likewise does it offer me shelter. To speak the truth, I [have] got no better abode of rest and safety than It. So omnipotent is Thy Name!' Muslims glorify God by reciting his ninety-nine beautiful names. Zoroastrians praise him in one hundred and one holy names; they call the ultimate source of the light found in the human heart, Ashem Vohu.

Sikhs prescribe japa of God's name in the first chapter of their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib: 'Let us repeat His name. As He was in the beginning the Truth, as He was through the ages the Truth, so is He now the Truth, O Nanak, so will He be for ever and ever.'<sup>13</sup> The Sikhs pray by repeating the name of God and singing his praises.

Om is the holiest name of the Divine in every religion that developed in India. The Guru Granth Sahib begins with the *omkāra*. Om is sacred to Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians as well as Hindus. India's Christians are also gradually accepting Om. Worldwide, Christians with a mystical tendency accept Om ('the Word') as their symbol for the highest supreme Reality, as Saint John's Gospel shows. Eminent western Indologists and Sanskrit scholars have also noted the universality of Om as the supreme name and symbol of the Divine.

### **The Practice of Japa**

Without divine help there is no spiritual progress. Therefore, before beginning japa, spiritual aspirants should invoke the aid of the *iṣṭa devatā* of the

mantra to elevate their spiritual mood and open themselves to receiving divine help. Thinking of the beauty and grace of the *iṣṭa devatā*'s form while doing japa increases concentration and spiritual discrimination. Holy Mother says: 'While performing japa take the name of God with the utmost love, sincerity and self-surrender. Before commencing your daily meditation, first think of your utter helplessness in this world and then slowly begin the practice of sadhana (spiritual discipline) as directed by your Guru.'<sup>14</sup>



MONIQUE JANSEN

Japa can be practised in various ways with the rosary or mala, which facilitates counting and concentrates the mind in the early stages of meditation. Counting

can also be done using the fingers. Holy Mother says, 'God has given us fingers that they may be blessed by repeating His name with them.'<sup>15</sup>

One can utter the holy name clearly with proper pronunciation in an audible voice (*vācika*), or fix the mind on God and move the lips inaudibly (*upāṁśu*), or ponder the meaning and practise silently with no movement of the lips (*mānasika*), which is preferred.

The scriptures say that *mānasika* japa can be practised at all times and in all places. Swami Vivekananda says, 'The inaudible repetition of the Mantra, accompanied with the thinking of its meaning, is called the "mental repetition," and is the highest.'<sup>16</sup> Sometimes silent japa does not clear away mental disturbances. Therefore, aspirants must hold on to the centre of consciousness despite any restlessness in the mind during japa.

To avoid fatigue, it is important to be vigilant and alert; for this the rosary is very helpful. It encourages continuity in japa, and one can resolve to complete a certain number of rounds of the rosary without any break in the thought of God. In the beginning, using a variety of *vācika*, *upāṁśu*, and *mānasika* methods sustains japa whenever a lack of interest or monotony manifests.

A Christian contemplative wrote:

In the beginning it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a *cloud of unknowing*. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God. You will feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself, it must be within this darkness and this cloud.<sup>17</sup>

With faith and devotion, aspirants will feel a genuine need for the practice of japa and will cultivate a dedicated taste for it.

Vigorous japa neutralizes lower thoughts, allowing aspirants to rise to higher spiritual planes of consciousness in meditation. Tension, restless outgoing tendencies, and drowsiness—dangerous when linked to japa and meditation—can be defeated by walking about doing japa loudly. As a drowning person clings to a floating object, aspirants should cling to the purifying practice of japa.

Of course, without absolute detachment and deep absorption in divine consciousness, we cannot have true realization. We must proceed systematically, firmly grasping the chain of the repeated sound, whatever be the difficulty confronting us. We will come in touch with the Divine in course of time. Holy Mother reminds us: 'By *japa* and austerity is cut asunder the bondage of *Karma* (past action). But God can't be realized except through love and devotion. As for *japa* and such other things, do you know what they stand for? Through them the senses etc., become subdued.'<sup>18</sup>

Holy Mother used to say that it was more arduous to concentrate the mind on the Chosen Ideal than to dig the earth with a spade. She recommended diligence: 'One has to be up and doing; can anything be achieved without diligence? One should find some time even in the midst of domestic duties. What to speak of myself, my child! I used to

**Try diligently** to check the mad outgoing tendency of your mind. Never begin your meditation immediately after sitting on your asana. By discrimination first draw the mind back from its external pursuits and lock it up within, at the sacred feet of your Ishta. Then begin Japa and meditation. If you do this for some time, the mind will naturally cease to wander.

The easiest way in this Kaliyuga is the path of Japa. By constantly performing Japa, the mind can easily be made calm and steady and finally it will lose itself in the Ishta. ... So, I ask you to perform Japa frequently and along with it think of the Ishta. ... This dual method brings quicker success.

—Swami Brahmananda

begin my *japa* in those days at Dakshineswar after leaving the bed at three in the morning, and lose all consciousness' (110).

When a devotee wanted to know the secret of japa, Holy Mother pointed to a small clock and said, 'As that timepiece is ticking, so also go on repeating God's name; that will bring you everything. Nothing more need be done' (407). 'When a pure soul performs Japa,' she said on another occasion, 'he feels as if the holy Name bubbles up spontaneously from within himself. He does not make an effort to repeat the Name.'<sup>19</sup>

Even mechanical repetition of the mantra successfully keeps the mind engaged in japa. Faith in japa purifies the mind and heart, and japa, in turn, strengthens faith. However, the mind turns inward only when meditation accompanies japa. Holy Mother says: 'Repeating the name of God once, when the mind is controlled, is equivalent to a million repetitions when the mind is away from God. You may repeat the name for the whole day, but if the mind is elsewhere it does not produce much of a result. The repetition must be accompanied by concentration. Only then does one obtain God's grace.'<sup>20</sup>

Faith and patience overcome dryness in japa. Swami Brahmananda loved japa and meditation:

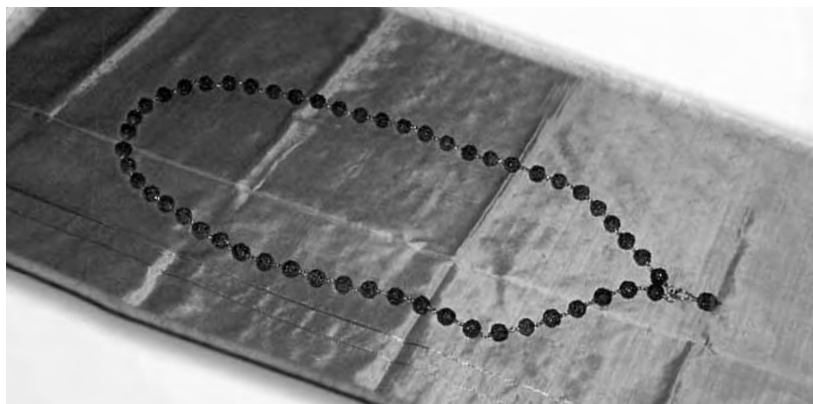
'You progress a little [in both], then comes a period of dryness. It seems that the doors are entirely closed. At that time it is necessary that you stick to your spiritual practices with infinite patience; by so doing you will find one day that all of a sudden the doors are opened. What a great joy it is then! In spiritual life many such thresholds have to be crossed.'<sup>21</sup>

When the period of japa is over, aspirants should continue to sit quietly contemplating the *iṣṭa devatā*, reflecting on the infinite love of God or praying silently for ten or fifteen minutes. Devout prostration or salutation to the Lord helps aspirants retain the spiritual vibrations awakened by japa and meditation. These observances make it easier to keep the mind on God during all worldly activities.

### **Japa Leads to Deeper Meditation**

From external prayer and worship, aspirants progress to the practice of japa and then to dhyana, deeper meditation on the form and attributes of God. Increased physical and mental purity in thought, word, and deed along with correct, faithful practice of japa and meditation ultimately guides aspirants to experience the personal and impersonal aspects of God through the continuous flow of one idea of God in the mind.

Japa is meditation with breaks, as it were. Meditation is the natural, spontaneous expansion of japa in the heart—the result of japa correctly practised with devotion and dedication. In other words, japa certainly strengthens devotion, but it is only when japa occurs together with true dhyana, or meditation, that the mind spontaneously turns inward, away from outer things. After practising japa along with meditation for some time, japa ceases by itself and the aspirant becomes established in meditation alone. Holy Mother says: 'The mind naturally dwells on one's daily activities. If you don't succeed in meditation, practise Japa. ... If a meditative mood sets in, well and good. If not, don't force your mind to meditate.'<sup>22</sup> Real meditation is spontaneous.



*Japa mala used by Swami Ramakrishnananda*

True meditation is never forced or artificial; it is a natural consequence of intense attraction or love for the object of meditation. This idea is easily grasped when we consider that our intense longing for someone or something far away inevitably brings it clearly to our mind and we are delighted to think about it. Even so, Holy Mother says: 'If you cannot meditate, repeat the Name. "*Japāt Siddhiḥ*—Realization will come through Japa."

Spiritual practices open the physical centres of power, which increases energy and restlessness. The attempt to control lower urges results in some nervous symptoms. There are reasons for this phenomenon. Japa and meditation awaken the kundalini, the spiritual energy that is 'coiled up' like a snake in a dormant state at the base of the spine. The awakened kundalini, passing through the centres of consciousness in the body, manifests in the form of mystical experiences culminating in illumination. Swami Brahmananda says: 'According to some yogis, there are special forms of meditation and practices which awaken it [the kundalini], but I believe it can be best done through Japa and meditation. The practice of Japa is specially suited to Kaliyuga. There is no other spiritual practice easier than this. But meditation must accompany the repetition of the mantra.'<sup>23</sup>

Regular japa is a very important aspect of deep meditation. Correct practice with self-control and self-discipline gradually brings all mental activity under control. The subtle, silent vibrations

of japa pacify gross vibrations in the mind. When a little experience of the mantra comes, an aspirant becomes calm and peaceful, elevated by a concentrated mind, and gradually convinced about the efficacy of the holy name of God.

### ***Japa of the Sacred Scriptures***

*Svādhyāya* or study of the scriptures leads us to God. Scripture can be uttered aloud, chanted, repeated, or pondered upon in silence. Certain scriptural verses on the holy name are particularly meaningful or inspiring. Praying to God to open our heart, we should open the scripture calmly and reverently. After reading the verse several times and committing it to memory, we should slowly and reverently lay aside the scripture and begin reflecting on the verse with closed eyes. The idea is to discover what God is saying to us personally through the verse, which suggests the spirit in which we are to call upon his name or repeat the verse.

Mental reflection precedes japa. Correct repetition of the holy name or mantra actively engages the spiritual heart, which has become one with the intellect or buddhi. Sri Krishna teaches Arjuna: 'I have given thee words of vision and wisdom more secret than hidden mysteries. Ponder them in the silence of thy soul, and then in freedom do thy will.'<sup>24</sup> Real japa engages our heart, wherein God is found. The devotee's heart is God's parlour. A single step towards God impels him to take one hundred towards the devotee. No effort, however small, is lost.

Devotional japa of scripture fires up our heart with love for God. Silent, loving contemplation upon the chosen verse without reasoning constitutes *nididhyāsana*, in which the name or word of the scripture goes from the mind to the heart, wherein its transforming power is realized. Men-

tal devotion, the knowledge of God through reasoning (jnana), becomes transformed into affirmative knowledge of God in the heart (*vi-jnana*), which prepares us for his vision. This is the correct practice of japa of the divine name or scriptures. The Gita is eminently suited for this practice. It offers inspiration, justification, and support for all devotees, on whatever spiritual path they tread.


Devotional japa of the name and meditation on the sacred texts bestow the same experience: 'Reciting the name of the Lord has also the very same effect [as the exclusive reading of the sacred texts]. The name is the nearest expressive symbol of the experience of the Divine, and it is believed that constant repetition of the name together with meditation (*bhavanā*) may result in yielding the very same experience. ... The name ... is the spontaneous expression in sounds of the deepest spiritual experience, and forms the vibrational symbol of the same.'<sup>25</sup>

The saints are a living scripture. Their exemplary lives inspire us to meditate on them. They have left us sayings, teachings, poems, songs, and anecdotes of their lives, which we cherish over the centuries. Relying utterly on the name of God, they overcame all obstacles, even death, and attained to God. Japa of their teachings about the name of God is an excellent form of spiritual practice that enables us to inherit their legacy.

### Repeating the Holy Name in the Kaliyuga

Humanity is in a profound state of spiritual ignorance and consequent suffering in the present age. The humble practice of repeating the divine name is the way to reach the goal of God-realization. Sri Ramakrishna gave a general instruction to all: 'Devotion according to Narada is the only path in the Kaliyuga; people will be saved if they but sing loudly the name of God. People of the Kaliyuga depend on food for their life; they are short-lived and of meagre powers; that is why such an easy path for the realization of God has been prescribed for them.'<sup>26</sup>

When properly reflected upon, the mantra

snaps the bondage of worldliness. True devotees are convinced that japa dispels all difficulties; they remember and repeat the holy name with joy even at the moment of death. This should encourage all seekers to utter the holy name or mantra unceasingly in every condition of life. 

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# Prayer in Contemplative Life

Swami Amarananda

**P**RAYER is an act of communication with the Sacred, the Holy, or the Transcendental. It may also be directed towards saintly beings or spiritual masters. Less spiritually evolved persons may pray exclusively to ancestors or even to phantoms. This communication generally takes the form of submissive supplication, often accompanied by adoration, confession, offering, and thanksgiving. Prayer is common to most forms of religion prevalent among humanity.

Prayer is the essence of religious life: so aver many savants, scholars, and religious leaders of various religions. The general opinion of Hindu religious leaders (as well as of the great mystics in Abrahamic religions) regarding prayer may be summed up as follows: Prayer is conversing with God, and meditation is listening to God; in other words, prayer evolves into meditation.

The word 'contemplation' derives from the Latin *contemplat-*, 'surveyed, observed', from the verb *contemplari*, based on *templum*, 'space in heavens marked off for augural observation'. The effective meaning evolved to convey the sense of deep thought, usually of a religious nature. Meditation usually means concentration on an inspiring object or person. It may also mean concentration on the Absolute; mystics in this category are fewer.<sup>1</sup> So contemplation and meditation are proximate ideas.

## Why do we pray?

For most of us, prayer consists in muttering set formulas once a day or once a week, without any profoundness. For others, God is someone to be persuaded, through prayer, to serve their utterly selfish goals. (For example, in World War I, the Roman Catholic clergy in France and Germany blessed the

cannons of their respective countries.) Desire, fear, suffering, worry, and compunction are ubiquitous in the human race: they propel us to pray selfishly. These five moods are classified under what in Indian philosophy is called *duhkha*, a disagreeable feeling of any type or intensity. Prayer is natural for a person in the clutch of *duhkha*. 'The sovereign cure for worry', said William James, 'is prayer.' *Duhkha* will end without any recourse to prayer only if we become omnipotent: 'When human beings will roll up the sky like a piece of hide, only then will there be an end to *duhkha* without realising God.'<sup>2</sup> The desire to go to heaven after death also drives us to prayer. In Pure Land Buddhism, prayer-like mantras are recited with the hope that thereby an incarnation in the Pure Land, where one can continue one's spiritual efforts, will be obtained.

For non-theistic Buddhists (who view the Buddha through the prisms of Buddhaghosha and Nagarjuna), prayer is the outpouring of one's good wishes for all beings, as well as wishes for one's success in spiritual practice. Buddhism and the monistic branch of Hinduism generally see prayer as ancillary to meditation on the impersonal. However, lay people in all Buddhist countries pray to Buddha; their prayer, as is the case with ordinary prayer everywhere, is prompted by the wish for intervention in difficult situations.

Prayer has always been an important part of atonement. In some form or other, the sense of *rita* (cosmic order) or dharma or the 'watchful eyes of the Supreme' has been present in all cultures; this sense informs our conscience, and also brings in its trail the idea of retribution. Through penitence, humans have found a way of lightening the load of their sin or sinful tendency. Vibhishana says to Ravana (Ramayana 6.10.22): 'O heroic man, since



bad omens are being seen (because of your stealing another man's wife), it is proper (and to my liking) that you hand over Sita to Rama as atonement.'

Prayer to saints for intercession is another common form of prayer. People pray to saintly beings, considering them to be enlightened and thereby having the power to grant their desires, or deeming them as so suffused by divine power as to become efficient mediums for communication with God. Even in Theravada Buddhism, common people go to a monk in times of disease, pestilence, pregnancy, childbirth, financial calamity, or similar worries. St Thomas Aquinas explains the philosophy behind intercessory prayer: 'In the first way we pray to God alone, because all our prayers ought to be directed to obtaining grace and glory which God alone gives ... But in the second way we pray to the holy angels and to men not that God may learn our petition through them, but that by their prayers and merits our prayers may be efficacious.'<sup>3</sup>

### Higher Prayer

Sometimes a lower type of prayer is sublimated to a higher one—a state of prayer characterized by non-terrestrial bliss. The Puranic story of Dhruva illustrates this phenomenon.

Only the spiritually enlightened person, after having known divine bliss, goes beyond fear and remorse.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual disposition motivates such a sage to pray. Higher prayer is also propelled by

desire. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the desire for spiritual liberation is not at par with ordinary desires. 'The leaves of *hinche*', he said, 'should not be bracketed with other greens.'<sup>5</sup> In advanced devotees, prayer sometimes takes the form of solicitation with a protest; this can be likened to similar entreaties of children addressed to their parents.

Truly said St Francis on the theme of sublime prayer: 'Prayer is regarded as a gift of grace from God, not as an independent activity of man, as we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the spirit himself intercedes for us with signs too deep for words.'

Higher prayer begins with the idea that one can gain admittance to a state of bliss, a state which effaces *duhkha*. 'There is *duhkha*, there is death; still peace, bliss, and (a glimpse of) the eternity prevail,' sang poet Tagore. With the deepening of prayer, in a non-congregational milieu, the sentiments of submissiveness and sinfulness are overwhelmed by love for love's sake. Mircea Eliade quotes Johann Arndt, a German pastor, in his book *The Sacred and the Profane*: 'Our end is to seek, find and ultimately be one with God, and prayer is the means to achieve that end.' The Bhagavadgita also attests that the man of divine love comes to know God and finally enters into Him.<sup>6</sup>

So the most noble prayer is for realizing the love and grace of God, for total self-surrender to him, for serving him masked as living beings, or (as in Jainism) for receiving inspiration from the great gurus of humanity.<sup>7</sup> Such prayers were habitual with Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Sarada Devi once remarked that one should pray for desirelessness. In a Puranic story, King Rantideva, himself famished and thirsty due to his boundless charity, saw a hungry and thirsty man of low caste entering into his palace. He offered his guest the only thing he had, a little water to drink. Before this offering, he spoke thus: 'I do not ask the Lord to grant me the eight yogic powers, nor do I pray for liberation from rebirth; my only prayer is that I may feel the pain of others as if I were living within their bodies, and that I may have the capacity to alleviate their pain

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### Divine Complaint

*I am a stranger in Your country  
And lonely among Your worshippers:  
This is the substance of my complaint.*

—Rabia



*There'll be the uproarious act of litigation  
against You, the Divine Mother;  
I'll restrain myself only when You  
pacify me by taking me in Your lap.*

—Ramprasad

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and make them happy.’<sup>8</sup> Buddha too manifested Rantideva-like universal love.

### Facets of Prayer

Prayer may be in silence, be a set hymn or incantation, or be in the form of a song. It may be accompanied with bell ringing, striking of a gong, incense burning, food offering, or lighting of candles. The face of the person engaged in prayer may be oriented towards a particular direction. The praying person may stand, sit, kneel, mildly genuflect, prostrate, keep head and torso slightly bent, or be completely erect, with eyes open, closed, or half closed, or with the gaze fixed on the tip of the nose. The palms may be placed together and forward by Hindus and by some Christians. This *namaskara* posture of Hindus may be accompanied by *namanam*, bending of the torso. The palms are up and elbows in for some Christians, and for some Muslims saying a non-obligatory prayer. In Islam, obligatory prayer is performed with a strict sequence of postures, including standing, bending, prostrating, and kneeling, accompanying a set sequence of pronouncements.

Words in a prayer may be memorized, read out, or said extemporaneously either audibly or inaudibly. They may be repeated continually for a long period. This practice is termed *japa* in Sankrit. Mystics agree that mental *japa* with concentration is the best. According to Mahatma Gandhi, ‘It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.’ The Gayatri Mantra of Hindus, the Angelic Salutation of Catholics, the Prayer of the Heart of Eastern Orthodox Christians, and the prayer formulae in various Sufi traditions are examples of prayer in the *japa* way.

Prayer, as in the case of *japa*, is often counted. The counting is sometimes preceded by breathing techniques. The habit of counting with the help of beads spread from India to the Middle East in Emperor Ashoka’s time, and was later assimilated into Christianity and Islam. Beads may be made of natural wood, seeds, berries, stone, or metal. They are strung on a thread or cord; in modern days,

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**Teresa of Avila** described prayer as ‘an intimate friendship, a frequent conversation held alone with the beloved.’ Mechthild said: ‘We two are united, poured into a single form through eternal fusion.’ The Bengal Vaishnavas, who sculpted an intensely emotional love for God, seem to echo this language. These words remind us of *prema-vilasa-vivarta* mentioned by Rai Ramananda dialoguing with Sri Chaitanya in the sixteenth century. The lover and the beloved are not really separate; a slim semblance of separation is maintained to create the polarity necessary in the act of love.

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chained beads are also seen. Sometimes, pebbles or seeds are used without making a rosary out of them. Some people in India use tamarind seeds for this purpose. In the fourth century, the Egyptian Abbot Paul used to take in his lap three hundred pebbles for counting his prayers. In the eighth century the rulebooks for Christian penitents ordained penances of twenty, fifty, or more repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer. The rosary with which such penances were accomplished gradually came to be known as the *paternoster*, literally, ‘Our father’. Tibetan Buddhists use a wheel on a spindle on or in which are written or encapsulated Buddhist prayers and mantras. Many Buddhists believe that spinning such a wheel has the same effect as doing *japa*. But in the moment of sublime absorption, no counting or wheel-turning is possible.

Once in a monastery, some elders remarked that it was difficult to know the quality of young boys who were beginning their novitiate. ‘It is easy,’ said one among them, ‘you just observe them at the prayer hall and estimate their degree of interiority.’ In fact, in any prayer rising to a level of high inten-

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One of the shining examples of *japa* practice is Yavana Haridas, a disciple of Sri Chaitanya; he used to take food only after repeating three hundred thousand times the name of Krishna.

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sity, the observance of tradition-bound features discussed above are absent and we can detect the following: the prayer goes beyond set rules, the praying person seems to experience profound joy, the gaze is fixed, and there may be horripilation (due to the secretion of adrenaline).

### **Hidden Forms of Prayer**

Japa mantras are highly in vogue in religions of Indian origin. Songs and chants glorifying the Supreme, and liturgy of various types are found in many religions: these things do not necessarily look like prayer. But prayer often lies hidden in them. Again, though acts of atonement and penitence are not necessarily prayers, their essence is supplication to God; hence they are prayerful at their core.

Karma yoga, as developed in the Gita and as illustrated in the lives of spiritual giants like St Francis, Sri Sarada Devi, and many disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, is nothing but an offering to God, the offering being the service rendered with one's whole being sanctified by constant remembrance and prayer.<sup>9</sup> For all of these saints, God is manifested in all beings and in nature. 'These are His manifold forms before thee,/Rejecting them, where

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#### **Once a Thai monk had a dialogue with me.**

Thai monk: In spite of my years in a monastery, I feel a dryness of heart.

Reply: It is, I think, due to your sin.

Thai monk: I don't get at what you are trying to convey.

Reply: You have killed Buddha. Killing Buddha is also a way; the Gita affirms that the contemplation on the Impersonal Verity is a valid way. But that way is reserved for those having supreme dispassion coupled with the penchant for subtle philosophy.

Thai monk: What should I do?

Reply: Please pray to Buddha for love and try to adore him. His presence is there in his images. The fourth president of the Order of Ramakrishna [Swami Vijnanananda] experienced this twice.

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seekest thou for God?' wrote Swami Vivekananda. In Christianity, the devotional attitude often commingles with what we call karma yoga, while in Hinduism this attitude is traditionally associated with japa, meditation, and other yogic and tantric disciplines. Karma yoga, which has a prayerful core behind the veneer of philanthropy, had been particularly absent in the practices of Hindu monks till it was inaugurated by the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Of course, among Hindu householders, there has always been a tradition of *dana*, charity.

### **The Rhythm of Prayer**

Different religions prescribe the number of times their followers are to pray every day: three for Jews and orthodox Hindus, and five for Muslims. The Hindu and Christian monastic habits in this respect are highly varied, depending upon the denomination. There are minimalists in all religions. 'Oncers' visit the church or temple only once a week; other minimalists may do far less. Devout followers in each religion pray much more on special days and occasions, and even those who are not earnestly religious are seen to attend prayers on certain occasions, such as the birth of a child or passing away of a friend or relative, and days of the year that have special religious significance. The highly contemplative pray or remember God always, because prayer has entered into their reflexes.

### **The Spiritual Master**

In Sanskrit, the spiritual master is called *guru*. Is a guru necessary for learning how to pray? For ritualistic prayer, a guru is not essential. But for diving deep into prayer, one needs divine help. That comes usually through a compassionate and enlightened person; such a person is the guru. 'To quicken the spirit, the impulse must come from another soul,' says Swami Vivekananda.

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* closes with this mantra: 'These truths, when taught, become verily manifest in that great soul who has supreme devotion God, and as much devotion to the guru as to God.' This statement may seem blasphemous

to persons not initiated into oriental metaphysics, which recognizes the drive behind the compassionate act of a guru as fully divine. There are Jews, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians as well as Hindus, Mahayanists, and Sufis who get help through supplication to hasidim, saintly persons, bodhisattvas, and murshids, all of whom are like gurus. For some sections of Mahayanists, as well as for many Hindus, prayer to the guru is a very potent practice. However, both classical and modern Vedanta as well as certain branches of Sufism (for example, the Naqshbandiyah) hold that there are different levels of spiritual guides.

### Prayer and Faith

In sincere prayer, the belief or conviction in the possibility of contact with a supra-sensorial entity or realm is implicit. Is this kind of faith tenable in this age of science?

We find some Western scientists in the recent past who admit the validity of such faith or think the topic worthy of investigation—these include the physicist Pauli, the psychologist Eysenck, and the rocket scientist Jahn, who also worked on psychokinetics. There are others who accept the Impersonal God. William James was one modern scientist who scientifically studied the existence of God. He affirmed, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that there are specific and various reservoirs of conscious-like energies with which man can have rapport in times of difficulty. But lives of mystics show that the link to God is possible under all types of situations, not just during times of difficulty. However, it is true that the bulk of praying people in all religions belong to the *arta* and *artharthi* categories, as described in the Gita (7.16)—the afflicted and the seekers of wealth.

### Solitude and Prayer

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that one should meditate in the mind, in a forest (to avoid distraction), or in a nook (where an intimate practice can easily develop)—*mone*, *bone*, *kone* in his native Bengali. He himself used to enter the thicket adjoining the

temple complex at Dakshineswar each evening during the period of his spiritual practices. He encouraged householders to do spiritual practice alone and away from their homes for as long a period as was possible for them.



IZZET KERIBAR

Prayer at Angkor Wat

The Gita uses the terms *vivikta-sevi* (the lover of solitude) and *vivikta-desha-sevitvam* (resorting to solitude) to highlight the importance of a solitary environment in the life of a serious aspirant for contemplation. Only a seasoned yogi may move about in a crowded metropolis without being distracted. That is why Buddha advised the young monks to fix their gaze at a short distance as they walked their way slowly through towns and villages for the daily begging of food. ‘Live in the world,’ said St John of the Cross, ‘as if God and your soul only were in it; so shall your heart be never made captive by any earthly thing.’

### Superior Contemplation

Spiritually evolved persons have a strong sense of the presence of an attentive entity who hears their prayers. Prayers without this sense are insipid, mechanical, and spiritually ineffective. The Indian hagiographic literature is replete with accounts of intensely prayerful saints. Christianity and Sufism also have produced many exalted saints. They have received divine grace through prayer. The British mystic Walter Hilton said: ‘It [prayer] is a way or means by which grace freely given comes to the soul.’

Without an element of devotion, real prayer is inconceivable. Rupa Gosvami, in his book *Bhakti-sandarbha*, gives us a sequence of how the individual reaches the state of supreme love after climbing eight rungs of sadhana or systematic spiritual prac-


tice: 'First there is *shraddha* (faith), then comes the company of the holy, which is followed by devotional practice; thereby *anartha* (worldliness) is blocked; this is followed by one-pointed devotion which entrains the coming into being of taste (for the interiorized life); the next step is detachment, which results in *bhava* (the divine mood), and finally in the sprouting of *prema* (supreme love).' Sri Ramakrishna emphasized that an ordinary individual can attain at the most to *bhava*; that only great souls like *ishvarakotis* (godlike souls) can attain to *prema*.

### Prayer, Austerity, and Virtues

Religious austerity implies qualities like abstinence, asceticism, and frugality. The Sanskrit word for this is *tapas*, meaning heat, which is disagreeable in a tropical country; by extension, it means undertaking difficult vows for spiritual progress. Certain aspects of *tapas* like fasting, giving in charity, and praying for long hours are found in most religions. Sexual abstinence with a view to sublimating the libido is called *brahmacharya*, and is acclaimed as a means to attain to the heights of contemplation. Religions which play it down on the plea that it is redundant or against the law established by God finally make little of spirituality.

The highest austerity is to knock out subtle vanities from the mind, so that *prapatti* or total self-surrender may manifest. For Ramanuja, *prapatti* was the highest *sadhana*. 'Not I, not I; Thou, Thou' was frequently on the lips of Sri Ramakrishna. 'I will rather boast about my weaknesses,' said St Paul, 'that the power of Christ may dwell in me.'<sup>10</sup> For several nights at a stretch, Sri Ramakrishna, in his early youth, cleaned the latrine of a scavenger to efface any trace of pride of caste. Madhva emphasized humility by affirming that any *sadhana* is futile without the idea that the real doer is God.

Should one try to cultivate virtues like fraternal feeling towards all, equipoise in pleasure and pain, and forgiveness, in order to progress in contemplation? In the beginning, aspirants should be careful not to be indulgent about their shortcomings. But

as divine love suffuses the heart more and more, the voluntary promotion of virtues ceases to be the concern of the yogi. Finally, a mystical maturity is signalled when, to borrow the language of Vidyaranya, 'Virtues like the absence of malice etc. are generated automatically in the person of Self-illumination.'<sup>11</sup> The lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna are tangible proof of this statement in the modern age. 

### Notes and References

1. Sri Ramakrishna advised Pundit Shashadhar, 'In order to learn archery one should first aim at a banana tree, then at a reed, then at a wick, and last at a flying bird. At the beginning one should concentrate on God with form.'
2. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 6.20.
3. *Summa Theologica*, 2.2, q83, a4.
4. *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.9.1.
5. In tropical countries like India, the consumption of too many leafy greens often leads to digestive trouble. *Hinche*, itself a leafy creeper growing in moist areas, is an antidote for such trouble.
6. *Bhagavadgita*, 18.55.
7. Jains pray to great souls out of the wish for inspiration; in the popular *namaskara mantra*, they bow down successively to ever-free souls, to perfected beings, to spiritual teachers, to learned preceptors, and to all saints everywhere.
8. *Bhagavata*, 9.21.
9. The Gita says that karma yoga leads one to a stage where karma should be given up in favour of yogic interiorization, and that a tested yogi should go on doing karma, keeping a facade of attachment to the world.
10. 2 Corinthians, 12.9.
11. He alludes here to the list of virtues in Gita, 12.13-19.

राम नाम मनिदीप धरु जीह देहरीं द्वार ।

तुलसी भीतर बाहरेहुँ जौ चाहसि उजियार ॥

*O Tulsi! Place the brilliant lamp of Rama's name in the vestibule at the entrance [for if the mouth is the entrance to our bodies, the tongue is the vestibule on which Rama's name is to be placed]; then you will have light both within and without (in spiritual as well as mundane matters).* —Tulsidas

# Worship and Contemplation

Swami Sarvadevananda

THE contemplative life is adored by spiritual seekers of all religions and faiths. Hindu scriptures glorify meditation, holding absorption in God in the highest regard: ‘*dhyānam vāva cittād-bhūyo dhyāyatīva prthivī dhyāyatīvāntarikṣam ... tasmād-ya iha manuṣyāṇām mahattām prāpnuvanti dhyānāpādāṁsā ivaiva te bhavanti ...*; Meditation is indeed greater than intelligence. The earth is meditating as it were. The atmosphere is meditating as it were. [The heavens ... the waters ... the mountains ... the gods and human beings are meditating as it were.] Therefore, those among human beings who attain greatness here, they verily appear to have acquired a portion of the result of meditation.’<sup>1</sup>

It is understood by all seekers of truth that calmness, serenity, and inwardness alone can bring peace, harmony, and joy in life. But how to attain that? Contemplation is defined as ‘*tatra pratyayaikatānatā dhyānam*’; an uninterrupted flow of the mind towards the truth’. But thousands of thoughts move through our minds every minute: the mind runs like a drunken monkey that has been bitten by a scorpion, as Swami Vivekananda says.

The Upanishad declares: ‘*Ekam-advaitam brahma neha nānāsti kiñcana*’; there is no many at all, there is only the one nondual Brahman.’<sup>2</sup> Everything is pervaded by that one consciousness: ‘*Sarvam khalvidam brahma*.’<sup>3</sup> To maintain a life of absorption in or contemplation on the Absolute, a pure, steady mind is needed. Sri Ramakrishna states that even the grace of the guru, the grace of Lord Krishna, and the grace of a Vaishnava, a holy man, cannot help the spiritual seeker without the grace of his or her own mind.

The human mind, at the beginning of spiritual life, is incapable of grasping, through the un-

trained intellect, the absolute Truth, the nondual Brahman. The Gita says: ‘*Kleśho’dhikataras-teṣām-avyaktāsakta-cetasām, avyaktā hi gatir-duḥkham bhavadbhir-avāpyate*’; Greater is their trouble whose minds are set on the Unmanifested, for the goal of the Unmanifested is very difficult for the embodied to reach.’<sup>4</sup>

The rishis, saints, and seers of all religions offer instructions for the beginner by which the mind, still moving on the plane of the senses, can be directed towards God. The senses and sense objects which ordinarily stand as obstacles before us can, through the rituals of worship, help us to go quickly and quietly into the heart in our inward journey. Swami Vivekananda explains, ‘The counting of beads, meditation, worship, offering oblations in the sacred fire, all these and such other things are the limbs of religion; they are but the means; and to attain to supreme devotion (*para-bhakti*) or to the highest realization of Brahman is the pre-eminent end.’<sup>5</sup>

Worship can help a novice develop a contemplative nature; worship performed by an advanced spiritual soul helps him or her to go into a deeper absorption or even samadhi. Sri Ramakrishna’s life proves that worship, if done with the proper faith, love, and spirit, can lead one to the vision of the Divine and to the realization of that which is beyond body and mind.

Most people have a great need to worship symbols, icons, and forms of gods and goddesses through rituals. In worship, we can adore the beautiful forms of God. Because the mind is absorbed in the various details of the ritual, it stops roaming about, and gradually feels more and more attraction for God. We develop a unique relationship with our Chosen Ideal, expressed through one

or more of the five moods of *śānta*, *dāśya*, *sakhyā*, *vātsalya*, or *madhura*—worshipping God in every-one; worshipping God as his servant, friend, parent, or beloved. When bhakti matures, the mind develops a great attachment for the Chosen Ideal. Just as a lover's mind is carried away from all other thoughts and stays ever fixed on the form of his or her beloved, the mind of such a devotee stays fixed on the *iṣṭa*, and spontaneous meditation occurs. In the contemplative life, an undercurrent of thought ever pulls the aspirant's mind towards God; the practice of worship helps foster this undercurrent.

### Worship

Worship is reverent love and honour accorded to the Deity, often as manifested in or represented by an image or sacred object. It is the ceremony or prayer by which the worshipper's immense love for the *iṣṭa* is expressed—an immersion resulting in full participation in the religious life. It is *upāsana*—sitting close to God, waiting upon God, contemplating on him, as an expression of our reverence and homage. The sincere worshipper becomes lost in this contemplation, and surrenders body and mind to God. Worship does not mean merely chanting mantras with the tongue and forming mudras with the hands. It includes a full spectrum of practices which, as the mind becomes absorbed, directly connect us with God. Such rituals include chanting hymns, singing bhajans (devotional songs), listening to readings about God, going on pilgrimages, visiting places associated with the divine sport of

the Lord, and being in holy company. The principle of loving God through rituals and relationship is found in all of the dualistic religions of the world.

### Contemplative Rituals in Buddhism

The life of Buddha, the great meditator, is the shining example for all Buddhists; thus meditation is a central practice of Buddhism. But rituals too play an important role in Buddhist practice. Some schools of Buddhism have developed devotional practices involving chanting of holy texts to protect against illness or misfortune. Other schools worship the Buddha himself. In Zen Buddhism, the practice of meditation itself is highly ritualized: every aspect of the meditation experience, from how one enters the meditation hall to how one leaves it, is regulated by rules. In Tibetan Buddhism, prayer wheels inscribed with or containing a sacred text are spun by practitioners: each turn of the wheel effects an utterance of the prayer. Elaborate rituals have developed in Tibetan Buddhism, which help sincere practitioners to calm their minds and achieve elevated states.

### The Christian Mass

The Roman Catholic and Anglican or Episcopalian mass is structured to direct the mind of the sincere devotee towards the Divine, and bring to it an inner peace. The devotional mood starts in the vesting room: the priests ready themselves by donning their sacred robes and vestments, and feel the enveloping presence of the Lord. Reverend John J Capellaro, an Episcopal minister, once described the transformation he feels upon entering the small vestibule before his sermon: the world is forgotten, and a loving presence envelops his whole being. He dons the sacred robe, and a great silence fills his mind with joy. In the church, the Christian devotees sit in silence while the prelude plays. The processional hymn begins: 'I am mortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes; most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of the days, almighty, victorious, *thy great name we praise ...*' The solemn procession,



Chanting as adoration



waving of incense, the reading of the Gospel, the sermon by the priest, prayers by the congregation, melodious hymns lifted up by the notes of the organ and intoned by the choral singers, all create a deep mood of devotion. The church vibrates with holiness when the hearts of its people are sincere. At the time of taking the Eucharist, the worshippers feel a communion with God and become totally transformed, thinking that even their physical bodies and blood are non-existent: rather, the body of Christ exists, and it is his holy purifying blood that is flowing through their veins. By this mystery, the person who was a sinner is cleansed of sins, becoming part of the very body of Christ. Worship in this way leads Christian devotees to a contemplative mood, bringing peace and joy in their lives and helping them to develop a more vibrant spiritual life.

### **Islamic Prayer and Dance**

Rituals play an essential part in the lives of Sufi mystics. Five times per day, they stop all activity and turn to worship God, following the same ritual of salat or namaz which was taught by the Prophet Muhammad and which is followed by all Muslims. The specific postures and prayers involve the whole body and mind, thus helping to immerse their minds in divine thought. Sufis also make use of their *tasbehs* or prayer beads when repeating names of God. Widespread among certain sects is the communal dhikr, in which the names of God and various prayers are chanted and sung aloud. The dhikr may include ecstatic dancing as well. We had the opportunity to join some followers of the Sufi tradition; their singing, dancing, and ritualistic prayers, though seemingly externally directed, turn their minds ever inward where they find a transforming peace. Their rituals then become an expression of their deep love for God.

### **Jewish and Sikh Sacred Texts**

In Jewish temples, the Torah, the ancient Hebrew scripture written on one long parchment scroll, is hidden, as one would hide one's most cherished



*Scriptural Study: Sikh Guru Angad and a pupil*

possession, away from the clamour of the world. In the serene atmosphere of the temple, the congregants wait in silence, their heads respectfully covered with the yarmulke, and their prayer shawls draped over their shoulders. As the cantor's melodious voice fills the air with chanting, the congregants are filled with a sense of reverence. Their minds are quieted. The Torah is then gently retrieved from its place of safety, and is supported and carried in the arms of the Rabbi as he weaves his way through the congregation. One after another, each worshipper reaches out to touch the sacred text, and then, with love and reverence, touches to his or her lips that hand or cloth which has touched the Torah. The cantor's song, the chanting of the prayers in Hebrew by the Rabbi, and the congregation's chanting in response, all serve to lift the worshippers' minds from their daily concerns, filling them with a deep peace, which is the hallmark of the contemplative life.

Sikhs adore and revere their holy text, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. They wave incense around it and sing the praise of the Lord regularly for hours as their spiritual practice. These rituals help them withdraw their minds from mundane thoughts. Many seekers became saints through this devotional practice.

## Hindu Science of Worship

The Hindu tradition has developed ritualistic worship into a science which, if followed, can lead one from external forms of worship to the depths of contemplation, and ultimately, to perfect union with Brahman. This progression leads to the experience of *sarvaṁ khalvidam brahma*, and ultimately to samadhi. Because this progression is not generally well understood, many look down on ritualistic worship. But sincere practice of ritualistic worship has brought many saints to realization. Sri Ramakrishna's life proves to the doubting and sceptical modern mind the value of such worship, and how sincere love for God leads to the highest goal of God-realization.



Pujarini

## Puja: Preparation

We shall now focus on worship, or puja, in the Hindu tradition, and how preparation for and performance of puja help all the senses and their master, the mind, to become engaged with and absorbed in God. Spiritual aspirants develop attraction for a specific form of the Divine as their *iṣṭa deva*, or Chosen Ideal—Durga, Shiva, Kali, Krishna, Rama, Christ, Buddha, or Ramakrishna—whichever form appeals most to their hearts. Being distracted by the business and stress of daily life, beginners cannot ordinarily keep their minds on their Ideals for long during meditation. But the activities of puja involve the body and mind in such a way that the mind is naturally drawn to the Chosen Ideal, and is brought gradually to contemplation.

First, we must prepare and collect the materials for worship. While collecting flowers and leaves, fruits and sweets, while stringing garlands and making sandalwood paste, and while cooking special food items, our minds naturally think about our *iṣṭa*, for whom these things are being pre-

pared. The contemplative mood begins to arise in our hearts. We contemplate offering to God those things that we love most. We busy ourselves in making sandalwood paste, cleaning the shrine, decorating the altar, adorning the image, and preparing the place of worship. All these external activities engage our senses in the world of names and forms—but all the while our minds are revolving around the blessed *iṣṭa devatā*. Thus arises the unconscious practice of *viveka* and *vairāgya*—discrimination between the real and the unreal, and rejecting worldly thoughts. As our minds go on contemplating on God, we move, effortlessly, deeper into the mood of *vairāgya*. And just as effortlessly, we fall more deeply in love with God.

## Purification, Consecration, Divinization

Our discussion will now focus on the puja ritual as practised in the Ramakrishna Order. The three preliminary steps in puja are purification, consecration, and divinization. These steps are applied to the worshipper, the articles of worship, and the Deity as represented by the image; each step brings the worshipper closer to the Divine. It is a movement from the gross to the subtle, and from the subtle to the causal.

How can the limited worship the Infinite? It is not possible: only God can worship God. Therefore it is said, '*Devo bhūtvā devaṁ yajet*.' Having become divine, one should worship the Divine.' So the underpinning of the seemingly dualistic process of puja is actually advaitic: it is the divine who worships, and God who receives the worship. This is effected by the following process.

Before entering the place of worship, we purify the body by bathing; we wear fresh clothes. Then we enter the shrine, and make a full-length pranam, surrendering ourselves completely to God. We try



to feel the living presence of the Deity in the shrine. We take our seats, think of God, repeat his name, and say, 'Whether pure or impure, wherever one may be, if one remembers the lotus-eyed Lord, one becomes pure, both inside and out.' With various mantras, prayers, mudras, and sprinkling of holy water, we further purify the surroundings, the seat on which we sit, the articles of worship, our hands, the flowers, the image of the Deity, and our own bodies. We drive away any evil spirits that may be nearby. We create a mystical wall of fire around us to shield us from any obstacles to worship. We perform simple pranayama, which balances the nerve currents in the body. The purification process moves from gross to the subtle; our minds also become more calm and indrawn.

*Bhūtaśuddhi*, the 'purification of the elements', is the crucial next step. Through *bhūtaśuddhi*, we strive to realize the identity of the *jīvātman* (individual soul) with the *paramātman* (supreme Soul). We sit in the meditation posture, and visualize the *jīvātman* as an unflickering flame burning in the heart. This flame then moves to the base of the spine, and awakens the kundalini at the *mūlādhāra-cakra*. The awakened kundalini, along with the *jivatman*, moves up the *suṣumnā*, towards the head. The lotuses of the chakras, which were down-turned and closed, now turn upwards and burst into bloom. When the kundalini reaches the *sahasrāra-cakra*, the thousand-petalled lotus in the brain, the *jīvātman* merges with the *paramātman*. The twenty-four *bhūtas* or cosmic principles also merge in the *paramātman*: the five gross and five subtle elements, the organs of perception and action, as also the mind, intellect, and ego—all merge in the supreme Self. Now Atman alone abides; we are one with the Supreme.

We then visualize the *pāpa-puruṣa*, the 'person of sin', who represents the concretized form of all negative and evil thoughts and deeds accumulated through millions of births, sitting in the left side of our belly. We dry up this repulsive creature, and also our subtle body, saying '*yam*'; then we burn them to ashes, saying '*ram*'. We bring the moon up

to our forehead, and let the nectar from the moon flow down, creating a new, divine body. Finally, we let the *jīvātman* and the twenty-four cosmic principles descend to their places in this new, divine body. We are now ready to worship the Divine, having become divine; the old person is dead and gone. If we have properly followed the process of *bhūtaśuddhi*, we really *feel* perfectly pure and divine; our minds are steady, and we feel the presence of the Deity.

Now that we, the worshipper, are pure and divine, we invoke the Chosen Deity in the heart. Touching the chest, we pray, 'May God's prana (vital energy) become seated in the place of my vital energy. Let his individuality be established on my individuality. Let my sense organs be overpowered by his divine sense organs. Let my speech, my mind, my eyes, my skin, my ears, my nose, my breath, become his. Let the *iṣṭa devatā* appear in my body and mind and stay on forever in joy.' Thus our body, mind, and senses are all lost into the divine body of the Lord. We are dead and gone as it were. Here sits the worshipped God in the body of the worshipper. This is *Devo bhūtvā devaṃ yajet*. Only God! A thrill passes through our body and mind.



*Manasa Puja: mental worship*

### ***Involution and Evolution***

Before the Deity is worshipped with external offerings, worship is done internally. One can spend a long time in this mental worship, forgetting time and outward conditions. We meditate on the divine form of the Deity sitting in the heart, as guided by the meditation mantra. We offer the lotus of the heart as a seat for the Chosen Ideal, and invite Him or Her to accept our worship there. All the offerings are to be given mentally, and the items are made of subtle elements prepared by the mind



*Arghya, snana, nivedana: offering flowers, water, and oneself*

itself. Finally, we offer flowers representing virtues like compassion, freedom from envy, and divine knowledge.

Now we are ready to worship our Ideal externally. This is the process: we hold a flower by our heart, and meditate again on the divine form of the Deity. Then, gently breathing on this flower, we imagine that our beloved *iṣṭa devatā* is brought out from the heart to the flower. We place the flower on the image and feel that the Lord is physically manifest now in the image to receive our offerings. We thus bring the Absolute, the nameless timeless Reality, from within ourselves, to the world of name and form, where that Consciousness, in the form of the *iṣṭa devatā*, can be tangibly adored.

### External Worship

We offer flowers and gifts to a friend whom we love; when the very lord of the universe is before us, what shall we do? We offer the best, the choicest things to the Lord as a token of our deepest love, reverence, and respect. This loving offering takes us nearer to him. That is why it is called *upacāra*, ‘that which takes one near’. We offer, according to our means and ability, various special articles to this most honoured of guests: among other things, we offer the nicest seat for the Deity, loving words of welcome, water for washing the feet and a towel to dry them, scented body oil, water for bathing, new clothes, ornaments, sandalwood paste, perfume,

flowers, leaves, incense, light, fruits, sweets, drinking water, and betel leaf. We feel thrilled that the lord of the universe, who is beyond time, space, and causation, beyond the comprehension of the mind, intellect, and ego, has, out of his infinite compassion, appeared before us to receive our humble gifts of love. The expression of our deep gratitude for the kindness of the Lord—his descent from his abode of *nirguṇa* (without quality or form) to *saguṇa-sākāra* (with quality and form), as it were—brings to our mind a deep satisfaction, peace, and mood of inwardness. For the purest of hearts, the deity becomes visible and tangibly receives the offerings. When offering food to Mother Kali, Sri Ramakrishna witnessed rays of light emanating from the Divine Mother’s eyes and touching the offering, making it prasād.

### Seeing God Everywhere

In following the path of worship, the distracted mind can gradually come back to peace and joy. Instead of fighting with the senses and the mind, we employ them in the rituals of worship, prayer, and japa; they become friends in our journey towards the Divine. In the beginning, worship may seem dry, but by regular practice, with devotion and understanding, worship will reveal its power to turn us toward the Divine within.


Swami Vivekananda says that at the beginning, work and worship should go hand in hand. A con-

templative mood evoked during worship will help one to see one's work as service to God. Work done in the spirit of service, again, will inspire one to worship and meditate on God. After long practice, work will be *as if* worship. The hand will work but the mind will think of God. When one's practice goes still deeper, there will be no distinction between work and worship: all work will be worship of God. Finally, external work will drop away as one becomes totally absorbed in God. Then, meditation will mediate all our actions.

Sri Ramakrishna told the young Swami Vivekananda, who wanted to stay in samadhi all the time, that there is a state higher than samadhi—that is seeing God with eyes open. This was Ramakrishna's own experience, after his first vision of the Mother:

During worship and meditation the Master used to see the living presence of the Mother in the temple's stone image of Her; now he could not see that stone image at all. In its place was the living Mother, the embodiment of consciousness, Her hands bestowing boons and fearlessness. Later, he described what happened: 'I put my hand near the Mother's nostrils and felt that She was actually breathing. At night I watched carefully, but in the lamplight I could never see Her shadow on the temple wall. From my room I would hear Mother running upstairs, as merry as a little girl, with Her anklets jingling. I would rush outside to see if this was true. And there She would be standing on the veranda on the second floor of the temple,

with Her hair blowing in the breeze. Sometimes She would look towards Calcutta and sometimes towards the Ganges.'<sup>6</sup>

Mother is everywhere in the eyes of Sri Ramakrishna. His experience resonates with that of the Vaishnava's: 'Wherever my eyes fall I behold Krishna,' or that of Saint Patrick, who experienced Christ on the right, Christ on the left, Christ in front, Christ behind, Christ above, Christ below. This is also the Vedantin's experience: '*Sa evādbhastāt-sa upariṣṭāt-sa paścāt-sa purastāt-sa dakṣiṇataḥ sa uttarataḥ sa evedam sarvam-iti*; He indeed is below, He is above, He is behind, He is in front, He is in the South, He is in the North, He is indeed all this.'<sup>7</sup> This ultimate experience of Brahman comes spontaneously in the life of one who sincerely practises worship, and who progresses to deeper and deeper stages of meditation: such a devotee is finally led to the experience of seeing God everywhere. 

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# Meditation and Reflection on the Divine Play: Lila Chintana and Lila Dhyana

Swami Atmajnanananda

**T**O reflect on the divine play of God and to let that reflection deepen into meditation is one of the greatest opportunities and blessings in the life of a devotee. It is a practice that not only brings immense joy, but also helps deepen one's spiritual life and transform one's nature. And it is a practice that requires no great learning, study of the scriptures, or powers of mental control. But once we get a taste for this practice, we find that it grows more and more intense, and we discover that a whole new dimension has been added to our spiritual lives and practice.

In order to fully appreciate this practice's wonderful power of attraction and equally wonderful power of purification of the mind and heart, it will be helpful to examine the three basic components of *lila chintana* and *lila dhyana*. As with all aspects of spiritual life, many of the concepts and ideas are deceptively simple. And while we are all familiar with the ideas of reflection, meditation, and lila, we find that the type of meditation and reflection we engage in in this particular practice is very much coloured by the concept of lila, and thus will be quite different from the types of meditation and reflection we practise when following the paths of yoga and knowledge.

## Lila

The term *lila* has three basic meanings, each distinct in some sense, yet closely related. It may refer to (i) a play or sport or pastime, a diversion or amusement. It also conveys the meaning of (ii) ease or facility, something that is 'mere child's play'. And finally, it gives the sense that (iii) something is not entirely real: it may be a mere appearance, a semblance, pretence, disguise, or sham, and may even

convey the meaning of a kind of joke (one not always funny to those not in the know). The term *lila* may be used in various contexts and with different layers of meaning, but in each and every case it refers to a kind of manifestation (real or otherwise, depending on the context). It is an idea based on the belief that God, or Brahman, is not merely a transcendent, unmanifest reality, but is also immanent, and manifests in a variety of different ways.

Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of this idea of lila as the manifestation of the divine in the relative world, and he often juxtaposed it with the idea of *nitya*, the eternal, unmanifest, absolute aspect of God. While he recognized that God manifests in numberless ways, for him the highest and greatest manifestation of God was in the human form. We read in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 24 February, 1884:

Since my arm was injured, a deep change has come over me. I now delight only in the Naralīlā, the human manifestation of God. Nitya and Līlā. The Nitya is the Indivisible Satchidānanda, and the Līlā, or Sport, takes various forms, such as the Līlā as God, the Līlā as the deities, the Līlā as man, and the Līlā as the universe.

Vaisnavcharan used to say that one has attained Perfect Knowledge if one believes in God sporting as man. I wouldn't admit it then. But now I realize that he was right (392).

So we see that, from this point of view, Brahman's manifestation as the different deities, as the visible universe, as all living beings, even as the Personal God, is all a kind of play, not real in any absolute sense and not explainable in any rational way. It is said to be all just for fun, since Brahman cannot feel any need to manifest or any lack if there is no so-called creation. If Brahman is to be considered

perfect, there can be no room for any desire, and so we end up with the concept of lila.

### **Two Aspects of Nara-lila**

But even from the point of view of *nara-lila*, God manifest in human form, we find two distinct ideas. From a philosophical and non-dualistic point of view, it is Brahman alone which manifests in the form of all human beings. Due to the force of maya, Brahman has forgotten its true nature, as it were, caught up in the drama of life. That is why even quarrels between one person and another, battles between one nation and another, have the quality of play to the God-realized soul. For it is God himself who is the actor, playing each and every role, in this divine and seemingly mad play of life. We find Sri Ramakrishna often in this mood, especially toward the end of his life, looking upon the body as a mere pillow case and seeing only God within, playing the role of all beings.

But there is a second sense of *nara-lila*, which is more consistent with a devotional attitude and with dualistic spiritual practices (though it may also, as Sri Ramakrishna says, lead to the knowledge of Brahman). This second sense revolves around the concept of the *avatara*, or divine incarnation. It is typically this idea that we refer to when we speak of meditation and reflection on the human lila of God.

We have just seen that one aspect of God's sport as man is that He manifests as all living beings, or at the very least, dwells within the hearts of all living beings as the higher Self. But the devotional schools maintain that in addition to this, there is a special kind of manifestation that takes place from time to time, perhaps necessitated by some extraordinary historical or social conditions. At such times an eternally perfect soul, which is somehow one with the Personal God, descends to earth and assumes a human body. And that soul does not simply come alone, but brings along its own shakti, in the form of a consort, and also a handful of divine companions. This is a belief typically associated with the worshippers of Krishna, and to a some-

what lesser extent, Rama, but is also quite similar to the attitude many Christians have with regard to Christ.

There is a belief among certain Vaishnavas that the divine sport between Krishna and the gopis takes place eternally in an eternal Vrindavan, a divine sphere not of this world. But they also believe that that play takes place on earth in every cycle. Here the idea of lila is especially pronounced, for Krishna is himself quite a practical prankster and fond of play and sport. And we find that each stage of Krishna's life is considered another opportunity to contemplate his divine nature and divine play: as a small baby, as a young boy frolicking with the cowherd boys and milkmaid girls, and even as the young prince of Mathura and charioteer of Arjuna.

We find all of the same elements of lila in the life of Sri Ramakrishna as well. When we examine all of the incidents of his life, we see that everything seems staged and divinely directed. All the characters are in place and assuming their proper roles: his divine consort, Sri Sarada Devi, ever-perfect souls such as Narendra and Rakhal, even M, the modern-day Vyasa, ready to take down his every word. And we can practise the same type of contemplation and meditation on Sri Ramakrishna's divine play that the Vaishnavas do with regard to Sri Krishna.

### **Meditation**

Let us now turn to the practice of meditation and see how it applies to this idea of lila. The main elements of meditation as taught in the yoga tradition are well known to most of us. We try to withdraw the mind from contact with external objects by closing off the senses. Then we attempt to focus the mind on a single point or object of meditation and try to keep the mind centred on that one point. When the mind begins to stray from that object, as it naturally does, we try to bring it back through the process of *abhyasa yoga*, repeated practice, until it becomes trained to remain fixed on the Chosen Ideal, the object of meditation.

As an example of this one-pointedness (*ekagra-ta*), Sri Ramakrishna mentions Arjuna and his prac-



*The Human Lila: Child Ramakrishna with the women of Kamarpukur*

tice of archery. At the time of aiming at a bird, Drona asks Arjuna, 'What do you see? Do you see these kings?' 'No, sir.' 'Do you see me?' 'No.' 'The trees?' 'No.' 'The bird on the tree?' 'No.' 'What then do you see?' 'Only the eye of the bird.'

But attaining this same kind of one-pointedness in meditation is far more difficult, especially in the beginning. The same Arjuna who was so adept at blocking out everything else and focusing wholly on his object when it came to archery, found the control of the mind to be as difficult as trying to control the wind—'*tasyāham nigraham manye vayor-iva suduṣkaram*' (Gita, 6.34). And in this regard, most of us are in the same boat. The mind rebels, doesn't like to remain quiet, likes to run around. And when it loses contact with its object, it may end up anywhere. So if our concentration is only on the 'eye of the bird', there is every possibility that when the mind strays, it will lose not only the eye but the bird as well. And then our

whole meditation is spoiled until we once more regain our focus.

This is precisely why meditation on the divine play of an incarnation of God or a great saint can be of such benefit to us. It allows us to keep our focus on a single point just as in the yogic type of meditation, but that single point has many facets to it, like a gem. And when the mind wanders away from one facet, rather than getting lost altogether, it can simply rest on another of the infinite divine facets. So the tendency of the mind to wander no longer represents a liability for us, but becomes rather a positive aid in this kind of meditation. We allow one divine association to lead us to another, so that we remain within the circle of the divine presence, just as the tether of a cow allows it to graze within a certain area defined by the length of the rope.

Suppose, for example, we want to meditate on the image of Sri Ramakrishna. As we enter into the chamber of the heart we find ourselves standing in Sri Ramakrishna's room in Dakshineswar. We picture him seated on the small cot next to the larger one on his left. We imagine his disciples, Narendra, Rakhal, Latu, Baburam, M, and the others seated before him on the floor. We let our eyes wander across the room and see the holy pictures on the wall. And the image of Sri Ramakrishna awaking in the morning and saluting each of the pictures, clapping his hands and repeating the various names of God, flashes before our eyes. Or we hear Narendra singing in his beautiful voice, throwing Sri Ramakrishna into an ecstatic mood. He rises from his seat and begins to dance. The devotees form a circle around him and also dance. Then he becomes motionless in samadhi, Baburam quickly coming to his side to see that he does not fall.

We let the mind wander to the northeast corner of his room, where the large container of Ganges water sits, and we remember that blessed night of Phalaharini Kali Puja, when Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Sri Sarada Devi as Shodashi, and we watch spellbound as both the worshipper and the worshipped become lost in samadhi and pass the night in that state.

Or if the mind is not content to remain within the confines of Sri Ramakrishna's room, we can accompany him to the Kali temple, and watch him sit before the image of Mother Kali, sing songs to her, wave the *chamara* before her, and enter into a state of divine inebriation. Or we can stroll to the north of Sri Ramakrishna's room to the Nahabat, where Sri Sarada Devi is absorbed in the worship of Sri Ramakrishna, or standing behind the bamboo screen watching the divine scenes taking place in his room. There is no end to the different ways in which we can enjoy the divine sport and company of Sri Ramakrishna through the power of imagination and the practice of lila dhyana.

### **Advantages of Lila Dhyana**

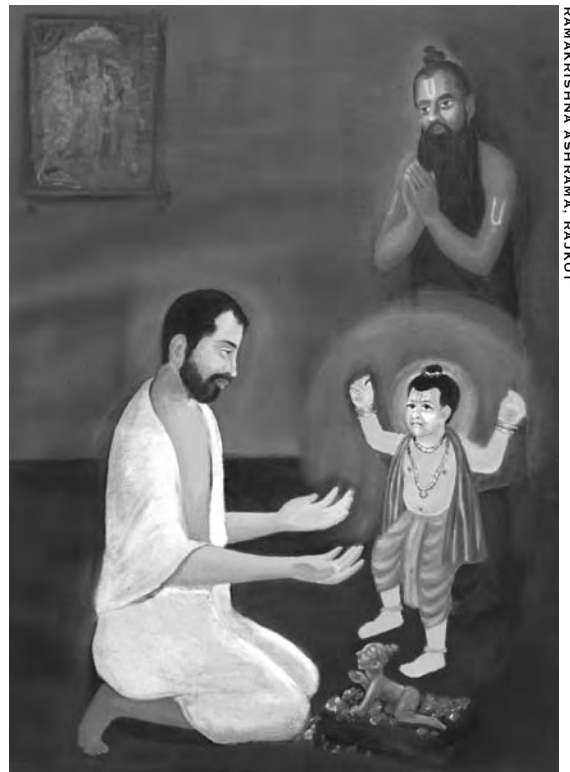
There are several obvious advantages to this kind of meditation. For one thing, it allows us to transform the faculty of imagination from an obstacle in concentration to an aid. The very same tendency of the mind to wander which gets us into so much trouble in other types of meditation becomes a positive help to us here. And by giving the imagination certain limits within which to work, we find that the mind does not wander to other things, such as job, relationships, family, or friends. A second advantage is that we can practise this type of meditation even if we lack the perfect control over the mind necessary in the path of raja yoga. We also find that this type of meditation counteracts some of the obstacles we often encounter in meditation, especially the feeling of boredom that may sometimes come or the tendency of the mind to fall prey to drowsiness.

One of the ironies of lila dhyana is that, though we may take up the practice because we feel unable to concentrate the mind in any one-pointed sense on our Chosen Ideal, we find that, through this practice, our ability to focus the mind actually increases and we eventually reach a point where the mind does get fixed on the object of meditation. When we feel the mind gathering itself together, we can simply imagine the kirtan coming to an end, Sri Ramakrishna being slowly helped back to

his cot, and again going into a deep state of samadhi, just as we see him in his photograph. Then we ourselves can resume our seat before him and simply gaze at the blissful image of Sri Ramakrishna in ecstasy. And like Arjuna, we have entered the state of focusing only on the eye of the bird, not noticing the surroundings or anyone else in the room or even ourselves.

### **Fruits of Lila Dhyana**

The first thing we notice after practising this kind of meditation is that there is a great deal of joy in it. That is because we feel our Chosen Ideal to be alive and present before us, and ourselves seated there alongside of him. We have, in a sense, crossed time and space, and experience the joy of the direct presence of our Chosen Ideal, all with the aid of the imagination. This type of experience, though far from being any kind of spiritual experience, nevertheless has a great power to transform our way of thinking and feeling. Our connection and relationship with



RAMAKRISHNA ASHRAMA, RAJKOT

*The Divine Lila: Ramakrishna with the divine child Ramlala*





Relics as inspiration: Sri Ramakrishna's footwear; the ten rupee note donated by Sri Sarada Devi to the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service

our Chosen Ideal becomes something concrete and tangible. We feel him or her to be our very own, in whatever relationship we cherish—as a friend, child, father, mother, or master—and our feeling of love and devotion grows in proportion as this feeling of closeness intensifies.

Furthermore, because we identify with the imagined body of ourselves seated before the Chosen Ideal in the chamber of our heart, we find, at the close of our meditation, that we had unknowingly dis-identified ourselves from the physical body of the waking state. So, one of the consequences of this kind of meditation is that our identification and attachment to the body is attenuated. We also realize that while we were dwelling in the presence of the Chosen Ideal at the time of meditation, in a completely different realm of time and space, we had become oblivious to our own surroundings. We had, for a few precious moments, completely forgotten the world of our ordinary state of consciousness and had entered into the world of the divine play.

From a philosophical point of view, we also come to realize that all of the elements of our meditation exist in the ethereal realm of pure consciousness and are composed of pure consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna often used to speak of *chinmaya shyama* and *chinmaya dhama*, both the Lord and his abode being embodiments of pure consciousness. And it equally applies to the image of the Chosen Ideal in this kind of *lila dhyana*, as well as to the surroundings—Sri Ramakrishna's room at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna himself, and all of the devotees, including ourselves. We get a sense of the oneness of our Chosen Ideal with the infinite Brahman, a

sense of the reality and limitlessness of the inner world of our own consciousness, and a sense of the hazy, transitory nature of the external world.

This type of meditation has a tremendous power to transform us in another way as well. Since we meditate not only on the image of our Chosen Ideal in *lila dhyana*, but also on the personality and qualities, a kind of transference takes place wherein we begin to take on the qualities of our Chosen Ideal. As we think of Sri Ramakrishna and picture him showering his love and affection on the devotees, we cannot help but imbibe some of those same qualities of love. And as we picture him going into states of divine ecstasy and inebriation at the very mention of God, we cannot help but acquire a bit of longing for that same kind of God-realization.

And finally, there is a great deal of carry-over effect with this kind of meditation, so that a portion of the mind continues to dwell in the presence of the Chosen Ideal at all times—at Dakshineswar with Sri Ramakrishna or perhaps with Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, at Jayrambati—and we feel an unexpected bliss bubble up from time to time when these thoughts rise to the surface of the mind. In this way a kind of natural and spontaneous recollection of our Chosen Ideal and the divine play goes on in our minds at all times. And this brings us to the final component of this topic, *lila chintana*, reflection on the divine sport of the Lord.

### Lila Chintana

Through regular meditation a kind of natural remembrance and recollection of our Chosen Ideal



takes place, which again is reinforced by further meditation. This is one of the greatest aids in spiritual life. It is of such importance that both Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother often said that it is enough if we can practise these two things, constant remembrance of and reflection on God (*smarana* and *manana*). But it is equally true that our meditation depends on an active and intentional effort to remember our Chosen Ideal throughout the day. And one of the best ways to do this is to practice lila chintana, reflection on the divine sport of the Lord. While there are many ways we can pursue this goal, there are two specific aids that are especially helpful: spiritual reading and pilgrimage.

Many spiritual traditions have a specific literature dealing with the divine play of God. For Christians it is the Bible, containing the tales and parables of Christ. For Vaishnavas it is the Bhagavata Purana and similar texts, filled with stories of the divine play of Sri Krishna. Followers of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi have the special benefit of accurately recorded conversations between them and their disciples and devotees. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, in particular, is a unique contribution to the spiritual literature of the world, for we find not only Sri Ramakrishna's words faithfully taken down by his beloved disciple Mahendranath Gupta, but also detailed descriptions of where he was sitting at the time, the direction he was facing, who was in his presence; each and every possible detail, including the phase of the moon.

This type of literature calls for its own particular kind of reading. The *Gospels* of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother are meant for daily and repeated reading, and we find that as we go on reading them, more and more light comes. While we are reading them, the mind can wander to the time and place of their origin and can picture the exact setting at the time. In this way our reading becomes an intense kind of contemplation bordering on meditation. We become filled with their spirit, infused with the joy that emanates from their words, and we feel the living presence of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother.

In addition to a regular habit of daily reading, there is another technique that is very helpful for meditation. That is to read a particular passage, and use the incidents or teachings described there as the subject of our meditation. For example, we read of Sri Ramakrishna's visit to Balaram Basu's house during the Ratha Yatra festival and picture ourselves on the inner veranda with him as he pulls the chariot. Or we read of the Holy Mother sitting in the kitchen in her home in Jayrambati, dressing vegetables and talking to her beloved young disciples from Koalpara, and imagine ourselves to be among them. The result of both of these approaches to the literature surrounding Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi is twofold: on the one hand we find that our minds easily fly to the presence of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi in our meditation, and we feel ourselves seated before them; and on the other, we have the tangible experience of the reality of the divine lila at all times and feel that we can experience the joy of sitting in their presence at any time through the practice of contemplation.

The second great aid to reflection on the divine lila is to actually go and visit the places associated with the earthly play of a divine incarnation. And it is important not only to visit these sacred places—Dakshineswar, Kamarpukur, Kashipur, Jayrambati, and Baghbazar, among others—but to breathe in the spiritual atmosphere, to contemplate the divine play that took place there, to picture the events that occurred and all the actors in that divine drama who played their different parts. The more we can burn the images of these holy places in our hearts and minds, the easier it will be to return to them in our meditation and contemplation.

This type of meditation and reflection on the divine play of the Lord may not be everyone's cup of tea. Some may prefer a more impersonal and philosophical kind of practice. But if we feel drawn to this kind of spiritual discipline and can practise it with great devotion and faith, a special kind of joy will come to us and we will feel that a new and precious dimension has been added to our spiritual life.



# ***Obstacles in Contemplative life***

**Swami Brahmeshananda**

**M**ANY people, both young and old, ask us nowadays: 'Swamiji, do you hold meditation classes?' or 'Can you teach us meditation?' I say, 'Yes, I used to take regular weekly classes on guided meditation, but now I have stopped, and I am not going to start again.' 'Why?' they ask. My reply is: 'For three reasons. First, not even five per cent of those attending these classes will practise regular meditation. Second, even if they do, they will not be successful, because most of them won't follow the preliminary disciplines and rigorous moral life required for success. And finally, if they succeed with their impure mind, they will prove a curse to society and to themselves. Their evil tendencies will increase. Some will go out of their minds if they practise meditation forcefully. It is easy to talk about meditation and contemplative life but is extremely difficult to practise it.'

Life is full of hurdles and difficulties, and a contemplative life is a hundred times more so. Let me emphasize the word 'life'. Contemplative life does not mean meditation alone. It implies complete transformation of life. Otherwise the accidents mentioned above are bound to occur. In the present essay, we shall restrict ourselves to the obstacles and difficulties encountered in contemplative life.

## ***Types of Obstacles***

There are four types of obstacles in contemplative life:

1. Some obstacles like hunger, thirst, sleep, and the like are physiological necessities which act as distractions to meditation. They must be attended to and can be reduced considerably through practice.
2. The second class of difficulties arises as a reaction to the attempt to lead a contemplative life. Our

bodies and minds are not accustomed to meditation; hence they react. The body starts aching, the mind becomes dull, and desires and passions even appear to increase. Those who sit for meditation for only ten or fifteen minutes a day may not find such problems, but anyone desirous of diving deep into meditation will face sharp and strong mental and physical reactions. The mind is churned, as it were, and such practitioners face tremendous mental tension. The whole life becomes unsettled, uncertain. In such a situation, many give up the contemplative life; others continue mechanically; only a few hold on through thick and thin till the end.

3. The third group of difficulties is due to our own mistakes, to leading our contemplative life carelessly. Disorganized living, overeating, sleeping too much or too little, talking too much, being too social, mixing with people indiscriminately, wasting time in useless gossip, reading unhealthy literature, and yet trying to lead a meditative life can never be successful. Many practitioners try to lead a contemplative life with their minds still impure. They want to continue to lead their impure hedonistic life, and at the same time aspire to taste the bliss caused by awakening of the kundalini. How can this be?

Others go to the other extreme of crushing even their healthy and noble tendencies. Love, friendliness, right conduct, service, music, and intellectual pursuits are like steps to higher contemplative life and help in overcoming baser tendencies. Some practitioners try to go too fast. They try to meditate for hours at a stretch or do excessive pranayama without expert guidance, and come to grief. Persons with extremely restless minds, and those who are temperamentally overactive, must start with a few minutes of meditation at a time, and increase it

gradually. One must be able to assess one's strengths and weaknesses. It is better at times to be pragmatic than idealistic.

4. Finally, many difficulties arise because our ideas about the principles and practice of contemplative living are hazy. If the goal is hazy, the path uncertain, and the values of life indefinite, problems are bound to arise.

### Some Present-day Obstacles

Traditionally, difficulties and problems are classified as *adhidaivika*, *adhibhautika*, and *adhyatmika*—those arising from natural calamities like floods, earthquakes, and droughts; those caused by other creatures, including human beings; and those caused by one's own mind and body. A contemplative is primarily concerned with the third class of problems, especially problems caused by his or her own mind. However, the first two kinds of problems are also hindrances and must be tackled effectively. The environment and external influences do affect the struggling mind, and unless contemplation has become natural, one must find ways and means of facing these hindrances.

Noise pollution, absence of silence and solitude, and lack of a suitable place for meditation are some of the commonest problems of modern times. The population explosion, radios, tape recorders, and loud speakers, and the phenomenal increase in vehicular traffic have led to so much crowding and pollution everywhere that even solitary retreats are not unaffected. How, in the face of such difficulties, do we lead a contemplative life?

A serious contemplative solves this problem by meditating at night. Even in a sprawling metropolis, most people sleep at night: so at night, there is peace all around. Hence, one must develop the habit of meditating at the dead of night or early in the morning, long before dawn. There are also other times—especially the junctions of day and night, the *sandhyas*—when nature becomes still. Alert contemplatives can easily detect these hours,



Seeking light elsewhere

and dive deep into meditation.

Eternal peace is always present as the substratum of noise and disturbance. One can keep a part of one's mind united with that supreme peace, on which one meditates during the hours of silence, even during the noisiest hours. This is the only effective solution to the problem of noise pollution. When we have no control over external circumstances, we must change ourselves and rise above the situation.

Sri Ramakrishna recommends that one meditate in a forest, in a 'corner', or within the heart. Yogis meditate in solitary caves, on mountain tops, or in forests. Such places may not be easily available. Places which are comparatively less crowded are the next best. If a person is really earnest, he or she will find secluded, pleasant sites conducive to meditation even in the busiest of mega cities. Such solitary places may be fewer, but they are never altogether lacking. A small temple or shrine less visited by worshippers, the bank of a distant river, a garden house away from town, and similar places can be found if one searches earnestly. One can certainly create a suitable place in a corner of one's house.

Sacred places and important shrines like the *jyotirlingas* of Shiva and the *shaktipithas* of Devi are very conducive to contemplation because of their strong spiritual vibrations. However, being pilgrim spots, these places have become extremely crowd-

व्याधि-स्त्यान-संशय-प्रमादालस्याविरति-भ्रान्तिदर्शनालब्ध-भूमिकत्वानवस्थितत्वानि चित्तविक्षेपास्तेऽन्तरायाः ।

Disease, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, lethargy, clinging to sense-enjoyments, false perception, non-attaining concentration, and falling away from the state when obtained, are the obstructing distractions. —Yoga Sutra, 2.30

दुःख-दौर्मनस्याङ्गमेजयत्व-श्वासप्रश्वासा विक्षेपसहबभूवः ।

Grief, mental distress, tremor of the body, irregular breathing, accompany non-retention of concentration. —Yoga Sutra, 2.31

ed. A contemplative may still find some suitable place away from the actual shrine but in the vicinity, where he or she can practise contemplation. Some have successfully meditated even in the crowded, noisy shrines using earplugs and eye covers.

If even these are impracticable, one must develop a habit of meditating within the sanctuary of one's heart. Catherine of Siena was not allowed to live alone by her father and was forced to remain busy among people. But this great Christian saint would silently and secretly dive within her heart and meet her Beloved there.

Contemplation does not mean only meditation with eyes closed. To see God with open eyes in people around us, to develop the attitude of a witness to our own physical and mental activities, to constantly remember God, and to discriminate between Self and non-Self are some of the techniques by which we can maintain a contemplative mood even in crowded environs: 'The ideal man is he who, in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert. ... He goes through the streets of a big city with all its traffic, and his mind is as calm as if he were in a cave, where not a sound could reach him.'<sup>1</sup>

Difficulties caused by climatic conditions must also be considered. The contemplative should not allow extremes of heat and cold, rains, storms, and the like to disturb his mental poise. He must have

the blessed quality of forbearance, *titiksha*. There is no greater protective armour for a contemplative than patience and forbearance. Some saints have even recommended that we practise contemplation under adverse circumstances by choice so that in the long run we become immune to climatic effects.

### Obstacles Described by Patanjali

The first of the nine obstacles enumerated by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutra* is *disease*. Some people enjoy a comparatively healthy body, but none can truly escape disease and old age. A contemplative must have a fair knowledge of his individual constitution and must observe the rules of health. Physical illness leads to lack of concentration, restlessness, uncertainty, anxiety, tension, and fear. Mental anxiety and tension can, in turn, cause illness. While rules of health need to be followed and illness treated, mental poise must be maintained under all circumstances. Swami Turiyananda, quoting Sri Ramakrishna, used to say, 'Let the body bear its suffering; O mind, you remain in bliss.' All great contemplatives have had this approach. The body must be neither neglected nor given undue importance. A contemplative must lead a life of moderation.

The second obstacle in Patanjali's list is *styana*, lack of energy or zeal for contemplative life. In spite of knowing the importance of leading a contemplative life, not to do so, or to give up doing so prematurely, is called *styana*. People afflicted with *styana*, though having an able body and mind, feel incompetent to lead a noble life.

*Doubt* is another obstacle. It can be about the goal or the path, or about one's ability to pursue it. All serious practitioners of contemplative life pass initially through a painful period of uncertainty caused by *samskaras*: one group pulling them towards enjoyment and another pushing them towards higher life. Such a state of doubt and uncertainty can be overcome by getting a clear idea of the spiritual goal and the path of contemplation through repeated reading of and deep thinking on spiritual texts (*shravana* and *manana*). If one is fortunate enough to live with a preceptor,

doubts can be easily removed. Finally, if one were lucky enough to get some sort of mystic experience, however insignificant, doubts would vanish. Hence one must hold on to contemplative practice. Gradually doubts disappear and stability is achieved. One must never remain in a state of uncertainty for long.

*Carelessness:* Some people are careless by nature and don't do anything with full attention or energy. Such people cannot succeed in contemplative life. They lead a mediocre life, which may eventually prove harmful and even dangerous. All the rules and conditions of contemplative life must be fulfilled with great care.

*Laziness* is another obstacle mentioned by Patanjali. A person with this bad habit continuously yields to love of comfort and ease, and avoids exertion. Such people fall asleep while meditating and are not fit for contemplative life. Laziness must be overcome by self-effort, a balanced, moderate diet, and wakefulness. It is better to spend a few years in active useful life, than to embark upon a life of contemplation with a lazy body and mind.

These five obstacles mentioned by Patanjali are essentially due to preponderance of *tamas*, the principle of inertia. Practice of the Noble Eightfold Path preached by Bhagavan Buddha can effectively overcome them. *Samyak drishti* or right attitude obtained by repeated study and meditation

on the four Noble Truths destroys doubt. *Samyak samkalpa* or right resolve, that 'I shall realize the Truth', 'I shall attain liberation in this very life', is the next step. Without right resolve, right attitude is of no value. A practitioner can overcome laziness, carelessness, and inertia by such a resolve. *Samyak karma*, *samyak ajivika*, and *samyak vyayama*, right action, right livelihood, and right effort, together with *samyak vak*, right speech, regulate body, mind, and speech and make the practitioner fit for the final steps of *samyak smriti* and *samyak samadhi*, right mindfulness and right concentration.

One of the most important obstacles mentioned by Patanjali is *avirati*, lack of the spirit of renunciation and lingering attraction for worldly enjoyments. Although one can embark upon contemplative life without dispassion, old impressions of hankering for objects of sense enjoyment will sooner or later arise and disturb one. Brooding over objects of enjoyment and sensuous imagination must be totally given up. Discrimination leads to detachment; such discrimination is called *bhavana* in Jainism. *Bhavanas* are twelve in number. Some of these are mentioned in the boxed note below, though in Jain literature they are described in great detail, with an illustrative story for each.

*Delusion or erroneous perception:* It is not easy to obtain a true spiritual experience. Yet, the beginner is often obsessed by the idea of having some expe-

### Bhavanas in the Jain tradition

To think that the body, wealth and property, family and friends are impermanent and the Atman alone is eternal real and immortal, is called *anitya bhavana*. Disease, old age, and death will have to be borne by oneself alone, none can share them; dharma or righteousness alone can provide support: this type of discrimination is called *asharana bhavana*. This world is like a fire pit or a jail or a dark well: to think thus is called *samsara bhavana*. One is born alone and will leave this world alone too; one has to suffer the fruits of one's actions alone; friends and relatives are with us only for a few days: such contemplation is called *ekatva bhavana*. In *anyatva bhavana*, the practitioner thinks that none

belongs to him or her—not relatives, friends, wealth or property, not even the body. In *ashuchi bhavana*, discrimination is centred around the impure nature of the human body and the pure nature of the human soul. Evil impressions caused by aversion and attachment, lust and greed, and other such impulses flow into the embodied soul and lead to bondage and an unending chain of transmigrations. This process is technically called inflow or *ashrava*. *Samvara* and *nirjara* are the Jain terms for prevention of further evil acts, and the consequent bondage, and destruction of the already accumulated karma-bondage, through meditation and austerity. Contemplation on these *bhavanas* leads to dispassion.

rience. Having read about the experience of light, *nada-brahman* (Brahman as the uncreated sound), or awakening of the kundalini, practitioners become impatient for them and get deluded by some petty sensations. It is on record that some practitioners fall asleep while meditating and think that they have experienced samadhi! Intellectual conception of high truths is mistaken for actual realization. Spontaneously arising mental pictures may be mistaken for visions, while a physically and mentally relaxed state is mistaken for the bliss of Brahman. Innumerable such false perceptions are possible. Genuine spiritual experience is possible even in the early stages of spiritual life, but it is always advisable to consult a more experienced person before concluding that one has had a true experience.

*Alabdha-bhumikatva*, non-attainment of the desired state: At times the practitioner is not able to attain what he or she wishes to achieve. For example, one may find it difficult to meditate in the heart. Even if one is able to focus one's attention at the lotus of the heart, one may fail to visualize the whole image of one's chosen ideal. Or, one may not be able to visualize it as luminous or living. Such problems arise in the beginning of contemplative life. There are many more difficulties in the advanced stages. These can be overcome by continuous uninterrupted practice, and strict moral discipline.

*Anavasthitatva*, failure to hold on to a specific state: Sometimes the contemplative is not able to remain at a specific level of contemplation but slips down to a lower state. This happens because one has not strictly observed moral rules or attained enough purity of mind, which are essential preliminaries. Besides, one must try to ascend to a higher state only after being well-established in the lower one.

We have, in short, reviewed the obstacles mentioned by Patanjali. Practice and renunciation, or dispassion, are the two general means of overcoming them. Apart from these, surrender to God, practice of japa, and thinking on the meaning of the mantra also remove obstacles. Patanjali also mentions practising one technique (*ekatatva abhyasa*) as one of the means.

After describing these nine major obstacles, Patanjali mentions four subsidiary obstacles, which are in fact signs of mental illness. They are pain, depression, tremor of the limbs, and irregular respiration. Pain and suffering are signs of illness. We do consult a doctor for physical pain—but often neglect mental suffering, which is a sure sign that the mind is not healthy. The feeling of helplessness in solving problems leads to depression. Unattended anxiety and depression may lead to tremor of limbs, palpitation, perspiration, and irregular respiration. A restless mind does not allow the practitioner to sit steady. To move our limbs during meditation is indicative of a restless mind. Hence Swami Vivekananda has advised that one must learn to make one's seat steady and firm before taking up meditation. Practice of *yogasana* (yogic postures) and some amount of pranayama under the guidance of an expert can remove these physical symptoms.

### **Obstacles Described in the Mandukya Karika**

According to Acharya Gaudapada, the author of the celebrated Vedantic treatise *Mandukya Karika*, there are four obstacles in the Vedantic path: *laya*, *vikshepa*, *kashaya*, and *rasasvada*.

*Laya* means a state of mental dullness or even sleep. The mind must be aroused and made active. Sleep is essential, but its duration can be reduced by leading a regulated life, taking light, easily digestible, and nourishing food, and avoiding extreme physical activity.

*Vikshepa*, restlessness of mind: If *laya* originates from *tamas*, *vikshepa* is a manifestation of *rajas*, the principle of activity. A mind used to worldly pursuits is naturally restless and extrovert. For years we have been engaged in worldly activities at certain hours of the day. During these hours the mind naturally remains active and restless. Similarly, the mind automatically becomes quiet in the hours when we sit for meditation regularly. But if we remain very active throughout a particular day, we shall find it difficult to meditate even at the fixed hours on that day. It is advised that by discrimina-

tion the mind must be weaned from its habit of running after sense objects. Forcibly trying to control a restless mind may lead to increase in tension and mental aberration. Restless persons must not try to meditate for long hours.

*Vikshepa* could be of various kinds: (i) The mind is by nature restless, as is the case with most beginners; (ii) Worries and anxieties of day-to-day life, and the thoughts with which the person remains normally engaged, cause disturbance; (iii) Subconscious impressions are churned up, and such thoughts, ideas, and emotions as were never experienced or thought of before come to the conscious surface; (iv) Passions, especially lust, are aroused; (v) Wonderful plans and ideas for work arise and tempt the practitioner to relinquish contemplation and put those ideas into practice; the practitioner must forcibly drive these ideas away and never put them into practice.

*Kashaya*: Even when aroused from inertia and withdrawn from sense attractions, the mind may enter into a sort of stupefaction. This is a serious obstacle and is caused by intense attachment or aversion. This is difficult to overcome because it is due to deep-rooted impressions of likes and dislikes.

Ups and downs are natural on the path of contemplation. On some days, we may have good meditation. On other days we may not be able to meditate at all. Some days we may get joy. At other times we may feel absolutely dry within. We must remember that even when we are not able to meditate well, we are still united with God in the depth of our being, and that nothing is truly lost. We might be gaining more energy for a higher ascent. We must, during such dry spells, hold on to our spiritual practice.

A contemplative has to draw his or her mind away from the world and consciously cultivate noble thoughts. One may pass through a stage when one can neither go back to the world, nor fix one's mind on a higher ideal. The mind then becomes absolutely unsettled. One feels lonely and lost. One can neither meditate, nor enjoy sense objects. One has broken all worldly connections and yet not

been able to unite with God! Everything—from daily routine to social conduct—becomes uncertain. This is an unavoidable obstacle. Some succumb to it and give up contemplative life. But one must hold on to the practice of contemplation with greater tenacity. Scriptural studies, holy company, and strict adherence to moral discipline greatly help in overcoming this difficulty.

*Rasasvada*: There is joy in contemplation. However, such minor experiences of spiritual joy are a hindrance, according to *Mandukya Karika*. The contemplative must not get attached to these. Dwelling on this joy is a hindrance. Although for mediocre practitioners such a taste of higher joy may not be a hindrance, it must be remembered that attachment to such joy is as great a bondage as attachment to sense enjoyment. The aspirant must try to rise above it by disregarding it.

### **Vasana-traya: The Three Desires**

Generally, a serious practitioner embarks upon a contemplative life after relinquishing desire for spouse, progeny, wealth, and worldly prosperity. Such sincere aspirants too fall a prey to desire for social recognition, for study of scriptures, and for the care of the body.

People hankering after name and fame or social recognition (*lokavasana*) conduct themselves in such a way as to please others, to get honour and praise, and to avoid dishonour. This is an impossible task. There has never been anyone in the world who was always honoured and never cursed. In fact, it is impossible to please everyone. Swami Yatiswarananda said that if someone is able to please all, there must be something wrong with that person. Insults and curses are more beneficial for a serious contemplative than honour and praise. It is said that insults increase one's merits, and honour causes loss of merit gained through austerities, just as a cow becomes tired and listless after being milked. Contemplatives have therefore often to behave in such a way that people remain away from them; but they must not resort to unethical conduct.

Although scriptural studies are essential as a



preparation for contemplative life, these may become a hindrance if one gets addicted to too much study of too many books. All great contemplatives, including Sri Ramakrishna, have decried too much study of books. Sri Ramakrishna would say that one needs just a penknife to kill oneself, but a shield and a sword are required to kill another, meaning thereby that the practice of a few precepts, rather than the reading of scores of books, is required for one's own spiritual growth. Hence a contemplative person must select one or two books most suited for his or her contemplative pattern of life, read them repeatedly, and put the instructions into practice.

Many practitioners, after withdrawing their mind from worldly pursuits, become much more body conscious and spend undue time and energy in keeping their bodies healthy and beautiful. But most advanced contemplatives virtually disregard the physical body.

In Jainism, wherein contemplative life is given great importance, ten categories of possible obstacles have been mentioned which a serious practitioner must avoid. They include: (i) a fixed dwelling place, if its upkeep is a cause for anxiety; (ii) family, if the welfare of the family members is a cause for concern; (iii) acquiring gifts and reputation that involves spending time with admirers; (iv) projects and plans—having something to do; (v) a following of students, or being busy with teaching; (vi) illness necessitating treatment; (vii) theoretical studies unaccompanied by practice; (viii) people dear to one, whose physical and psychological needs demand attention; (ix) travelling about; (x) supernatural powers.

### **Vitarkabadha: Obstacles Caused by Contrary Views**

No one can succeed in leading a truly contemplative life without strictly observing moral and ethical values like truthfulness, non-violence, continence, non-possessiveness, and non-stealing. One of the important obstacles to observance of these values is caused by contrary views, as mentioned

by Patanjali. This hindrance has become extremely common in modern times.

Due to the impressions of innumerable past lives, violence, untruth, and the like have become natural for us, and are now even considered essential for fulfilling our selfish interests. Killing an enemy, ferocious animals, or even mosquitoes is considered essential for our protection and well-being. Such activities are endorsed as righteous, dharmic. Some people undertake such acts themselves, some get them done through others, while still others endorse such acts. Again, we may be prompted to undertake such ethically dubious acts out of greed, prompted by anger, or in the erroneous belief that they are meritorious acts.

While in certain specific situations such acts may be permissible, a person aspiring to rise to higher levels in contemplative life must give them up altogether. The method of weaning oneself from such contrary actions, beliefs, and promptings is called *pratipaksha bhavanam* in the *Yoga Sutra*, and involves deeply thinking about the evil after-effects of violence, falsehood, possessiveness, sexual indulgence, stealing, and such other acts.

### **Conclusion**

As will be evident from going through this special issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*, the contemplative life is a highly specialized form of life, which is not so easy as it might appear from the outside. It requires a lot of preparation and clearing of the way. The obstacles in this path are many, and as one progresses, newer and subtler ones crop up. It is not possible in this short essay to describe all of them. Practitioners, as they advance, will discover them themselves, and if they are sincere, will be able to get over them either on their own, or with the help of other contemplative co-practitioners or experts in the field.

May their path be free from obstacles.



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# Fruits of Contemplation: Some Reflections

Swami Bhaskarananda

**C**ONTEMPLATION means concentrated thinking or meditation. It can be of two kinds—spiritual and secular. Every action must produce an effect or fruit. Contemplation is action; therefore it also must produce some effect or fruit.

## Four Fruits

The Hindu scriptures tell us about the four goals of human life. They are kama, artha, dharma, and moksha. Sri Ramprasad, the saintly poet of Bengal, in one of his songs describes the Divine Mother Kali as a wish-fulfilling tree and these four goals of human life as its fruits. These fruits can be achieved through contemplation.

Kama in simple language means desire. In this particular case, however, it means desire for objects of sense enjoyment. And sense enjoyment is possible only in the realm of matter. We can have sense enjoyment only in the worlds that we experience in the waking and dream states, because both are realms of matter—one gross and the other subtle.

It should be mentioned here that the ancient Sankhya philosophers of India knew that tangible gross matter, energy, and even the mind are only different evolved states of the subtlest primordial matter called Prakriti. Prakriti is composed of three extremely subtle substances called *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. So far as the mind is concerned, only when *sattva* is preponderant in it can it know objects in the deepest possible manner.

Artha means money. Money is no other than potential sense enjoyment, because in exchange for money we get objects of sense enjoyment. Dharma has been defined in our scriptures as '*dharanad dharma ityahub*'; that which sustains'. For example, fire has the capacity to burn. It is this capacity that

sustains fire; without it fire ceases to be fire. Therefore, the dharma of fire is its burning capacity. In case of us human beings, it means something that forms the very core of our existence—something without which we cease to exist. According to our scriptures, that mysterious 'something' is the indwelling divinity or God. It sustains us. Therefore, this is our true dharma.

God has two aspects—one endowed with personality, the other devoid of any personality. The first one is called Ishvara or Personal God, and the second, Brahman or Impersonal God.

God or divinity cannot be known by an ordinary mind. Only a mind with a preponderance of *sattva* is able to experience God. Such a mind is also called a pure mind. This state of mind can be achieved by intense spiritual practice.

Dharma leads us to moksha. One who experiences Ishvara or Brahman attains moksha. Moksha is liberation from the cycle of repeated births and deaths in this transmigratory world. According to the Hindu scriptures, moksha can be attained by any of the four yogas—bhakti yoga, raja yoga, jnana yoga, or karma yoga.

## Thought and Action

Among the four goals of human life, dharma and moksha are spiritual goals, while kama and artha are secular. To achieve any of these goals action is necessary. But there cannot be any action without a thought behind it. Even our reflex efforts are the result of repeated actions of the past, which also are prompted by our thoughts. A little deep thinking enables us to realize that our human personalities are no other than the effects of our past thoughts. In other words, we are really more our minds than our bodies. A saint is *mentally* a saint, not *physically*.

The sage Ashtavakra's body was defective, but that did not affect his saintliness. Similarly, a sinner is mentally a sinner, not physically.

What one contemplates, one becomes. If a person has holy thoughts most of the time, he or she becomes saintly. On the other hand, one who continually indulges in evil thoughts becomes evil. Mundane thinking will lead us to the fruits of kama and artha, while spiritual thinking will enable us to achieve the fruits of dharma and moksha. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'If you meditate on an ideal you will acquire its nature. If you think of God day and night, you will acquire the nature of God.'

Mahendranath Datta, a younger brother of Swami Vivekananda, was a scholar who authored many books. In one of his books he gives an interesting example of how concentrated mundane thinking can transform a person. He narrates the following incident about a circus performer who could manage a show with several caged tigers: Once Mahendranath Datta asked the performer how he accomplished that near-impossible feat. The man said, 'Before entering the tiger's cage, I start thinking with great concentration that I am a tiger, only much bigger and more powerful than the one in the cage. Thinking intensely in this manner, when I enter the cage I am able to play with one, two, or three tigers. I do not feel I am a man then, but a huge tiger.'

Mahendranath Datta became curious and asked the performer if he would not mind demonstrating his technique. The performer agreed. Within a few minutes his face started changing. It acquired a strange, ferocious look. The transformation was so abrupt and scary that Mahendranath, then a young man, became alarmed and asked the performer to stop whatever he was doing. Even after stopping, the performer took quite a while to regain his usual mental composure.

This case shows us how contemplation of even the secular kind can literally transform a person, albeit temporarily. There are many examples, however, of how spiritual contemplation can permanently transform ordinary, imperfect people into

better, saintly people.

In the epic Ramayana, the well-known story of Ratnakara provides us with a beautiful example of how spiritual contemplation can transform even a robber into a saint. It is not that important to find out whether a termite mound really grew around Ratnakara's body or not. It is more probable that he sat in a place surrounded by several termite mounds. The storyteller obviously used this idea to dramatize Ratnakara's total absorption in the chanting of the holy name. The most important message that we get from the story is that the robber Ratnakara became spiritually transformed into the great sage Valmiki. In other words, the fruit of Ratnakara's spiritual contemplation was his experience of God. This experience transformed him into Valmiki.

Our scriptures and religious tradition provide us with many such examples. But the age of inspirational mythology is long past, and we now live in a world of scientific scepticism about religion and spirituality. Science encourages us to test every truth, spiritual or secular, through verifiable experience and reasoning.

### ***Can Ordinary People become Saints?***

In this age of scientific scepticism, some of us may wonder if such transformation can really happen to ordinary people living in this age. These people are not like exotic fruit trees; they are relatively valueless and insignificant. Can they ever yield good fruits? Can they have such wonderful transformation as seen in the case of Ratnakara? Can they transform their ordinariness into extraordinary saintliness through spiritual contemplation? The answer to such questions is an emphatic 'Yes'.

We find many examples of such transformation among the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Latu, Ag-hormani, and Girish Chandra Ghosh are three of them. They are well known within the circle of admirers and devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. Mainly through bhakti yoga, the path of devotion, they came to experience high spiritual states and eventually attain God-realization.

Latu was a young illiterate servant in Dr Ram-

chandra Datta's home in Calcutta. Through his employer he came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, whom he accepted as his guru. Having no formal education, he was never able to read any holy books. Other than serving his guru and his guru's saintly wife, Sri Sarada Devi, for a few years, his only occupation was doing his spiritual practices of intense japa and meditation for most of the day and night. And he eventually got the fruits of his spiritual contemplation. He experienced God. The illiterate house servant Latu became Latu Maharaj, also known and revered in the Ramakrishna Order as Swami Adbhutananda.

Aghoramani, an illiterate child-widow of a Bengal village, experienced God in the form of the baby Krishna or Gopala. She used to have the continual vision of Gopala, whom she looked upon as her child. Like a mother, she would feed him, clothe him, talk to him, and play with him. Thus she came to be known as 'Gopaler Ma' or Gopala's mother. This spiritual experience was the result of her many years of spiritual contemplation.

It was her long-standing practice to rise at two o'clock in the morning. After chanting her *ishta mantra* for five or six hours, she would take a bath in the Ganga and then help with the worship in the household temple until noon. She then cooked a simple meal for herself, and after eating, rested for a short while. Then she would sit again and chant her mantra till the evening *arati* started at the temple. Much of the night she spent doing japa. She followed this routine almost without a break for many years. In short, every day she spent at least sixteen hours in spiritual contemplation.

When Sri Ramakrishna saw Aghoramani having the vision of her divine child Gopala continuously, he smiled and said to a woman devotee present there, 'Just see, she is completely filled with Bliss; her mind has now gone to the sphere of Gopala!'

Aghoramani had attained spiritual illumination; she had become a God-realized soul—a saint.

What brought about this wonderful spiritual transformation in Aghoramani? It is not hard to understand that her sainthood was the fruit of her many years of contemplation.

Then there is the story of Girish Chandra Ghosh. In his younger days he was of bohemian nature, and for a while had no faith in God. At that time he took an axe and demolished a clay image of the Divine Mother Durga that had been brought to his home. Later he turned out to be the best actor of the Calcutta stage, and one of the greatest playwrights of Bengal. Nevertheless, he had acquired a few vices, including an addiction to drinking.

However, after coming in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, a great change came over him. He became genuinely interested in spiritual life and started looking upon Sri Ramakrishna not only as his guru but also as a divine incarnation. One day, he surrendered himself completely to Sri Ramakrishna, and asked him how he should live from then on.

Sri Ramakrishna instructed Girish to remember God and think of Him every morning and evening. But Girish was honest with himself; he realized that he would not be able to follow his guru's instructions. So he kept silent, and looked downcast. Sri Ramakrishna then asked him to 'remember Him once before taking food and once before going to bed'. Girish was not sure if he could do even that, so very irregular was his life. Sri Ramakrishna understood the disciple's condition, and said, 'Very well, then give me the power of attorney.'

Girish readily agreed to that proposal. But he gradually realized that not only his spiritual practice, but also whatever he had achieved or owned in his life no longer belonged to him, since he had given his power of attorney to Sri Ramakrishna. This



*Aghoramani Devi: Gopaler Ma*

realization generated in his heart a feeling of total surrender toward his guru, whom he looked upon as God. Thus, surrendering everything to God, Girish became transformed beyond recognition. All his vices, including his addiction to drinking, dropped away. The bohemian and atheist Girish became a saintly soul.

At the fag-end of his life Girish would proudly announce, ‘Look at me! See what I was, and what Sri Ramakrishna has made of me!’

After seeing all these wonderful examples of spiritual transformation, we know the reason *why* such transformation happened. We know that the only cause of such transformation was spiritual contemplation. But still we may like to know *how* spiritual contemplation transformed these devotees into saints.

### Mechanism of Illumination

Saintliness is a state of mind. The mind acquires this state after experiencing God. According to the yogic school of Hinduism, such experience can come only when the spiritual energy inherent in all human beings, called the kundalini, has been awakened through spiritual contemplation. Every person has this energy lying dormant in him or her. Like a coiled up snake in a state of hibernation, it lies dormant at the base of the spine. The Sanskrit word *kundalini* means ‘something that is coiled up’.

When a person with a concentrated mind thinks of God—who is ever pure and the holiest of the holy—through either incessant japa or meditation, he or she becomes mentally holy and pure. A pure mind has a preponderance of *sattva*. This mind enables one to experience God. Aside from this, something else also happens.

The scriptures talk about three kinds of space: physical-space or *mahakasha*, mental-space or *chittakasha*, and knowledge-space or *chidakasha*. The physical world, with all its stars and planets, exists in *mahakasha*. We, the creatures on this planet earth, also exist in *mahakasha*. Whatever exists in the domain of our thoughts or imagination exists

in *chittakasha*. Similarly, all objects and living beings in the dream world exist in *chittakasha*.

To explain *chidakasha*, I would like to refer to yoga philosophy again. According to the yogis, there are three very narrow channels running through the backbone. The left channel is *ida*, the right channel is *pingala*, and the channel in between them is *sushumna*. When we are physically and mentally active, our energy passes through the *pingala* channel. At this time our outgoing breath is stronger through the right nostril. When our body and mind are resting, our energy passes through the *ida* channel. At this time our outgoing breath is stronger through the left nostril. The *sushumna* channel is usually closed at its lower end. It can be made to open up through intense spiritual practices such as japa and meditation. When awakened, the kundalini enters the *sushumna* channel and starts coursing upward toward the brain. When that happens, the spiritual aspirant gains access to the knowledge-space, the *chidakasha*.

What a spiritual aspirant experiences in *mahakasha* or *chittakasha* are not genuine spiritual experiences. Being the products of vivid imagination, they are not any different from fantasy or hallucination. But whatever the spiritual aspirant experiences in the *chidakasha* is genuine spiritual experience. Such experience alone transforms a mind permanently. As the kundalini courses higher and higher through the *sushumna* channel, the spiritual aspirant has higher and higher genuine spiritual experiences. Eventually, when the spiritual energy reaches the *sahasrara*, the highest point of the *sushumna* channel, the spiritual aspirant becomes one with divinity. This is spiritual enlightenment—the ultimate fruit of spiritual contemplation. A person becomes truly fulfilled only after this experience.

Therefore, to have genuine spiritual experience, to experience God, the awakening of the kundalini is essential. This is *how* intense and concentrated spiritual contemplation permanently transforms an ordinary person into a saint, a God-realized soul.



# The Vaiśṇava Contemplative Tradition

Swami Purnananda

THE term *Vaiṣṇava* refers to devotees of God in general as well as to devotees of Vishnu in particular. As is evident, the word has been derived from *Vishnu*. In one sense, *Vishnu* denotes the omnipresent, all-pervading Being, while in another, it represents one of the famous triad of deities of the Hindu faith, the preserver of creation. He has four arms, holding a conch (Pāñcajanya), a discus (Sudarśana), a mace (Kaumudakī), and a lotus. This concept of Vishnu is Puranic. But it has a very ancient origin. The name Vishnu appears in the Rig Veda: '*Idam viṣṇur-vi cakrame tredhā nidadhe padam, samūhḷam-asya pāmsure*; Vishnu traversed this world: thrice he planted his foot and the whole (world) was gathered in the dust of his footsteps.'<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he has been conceived as a personification of light and of the sun (1.155). He is called Śipiviṣṭa, clothed in rays of light. The wise ever contemplate the supreme station (*paramam padam*) of Vishnu as the eye ranging over the sky (1.22.20). The idea of the Vedic Vishnu is abstract, whereas that of Puranic Vishnu is anthropomorphic. He is the unconquerable Preserver who lives in Vaikuṇṭha or Goloka, and during the period of dissolution he rests on the great serpent Ananta or Śeṣa in the midst of the ocean of causal waters (*kāraṇa salila*). Many Puranas describe him as the Supreme God. Nevertheless, even the Puranic idea of Vishnu has its source in the Vedas.

Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa, and Kṛṣṇa are the main epithets of Vishnu. Krishna is the primary object of devotion in the Bhāgavata and Gauḍīya traditions. He is worshipped in several forms: as Vāsudeva Krishna (the Supreme Being), as Gopāla Krishna (baby Krishna), as Vanamālī Krishna (the young cowherd), and as the king of Dwāraka.

## Vaiśṇava Āgama

The Āgamas are the secondary scriptures of Hinduism, derived from the Vedas. Though they have many divisions, the primary Āgamas are five in number: Saura, Śākta, Gāṇapatya, Vaiṣṇava, and Śaiva or Pāśupatya. The Vaiṣṇava Āgama has two main subdivisions: the Vaikhānasa Āgama and the Pāñcarātra Āgama. As all these Āgamas are said to have been derived from the Vedas, they are called Śrauta Āgamas.

The Vaiṣṇava tradition is primarily a tradition of bhakti, devotion to God. Nārada defines bhakti as being of the nature of intense love for God: *Sā tvasmin parama premarūpā*.<sup>2</sup> The sage Śāṇḍilya defines it as supreme attachment to God: *sā parānuraaktir-īśvare*.<sup>3</sup> Two types of bhakti have been described by the teachers of bhakti: *vaidhī* and *rāgānugā*. *Vaidhī bhakti* involves worship and other rituals as instructed by the scriptures, whereas in *rāgānugā bhakti* intense love for God is fundamental, and rituals and worship become secondary. The Vaikhānasa Āgama deals primarily with *vaidhī bhakti*, while Pāñcarātra Āgama teaches both *vaidhī* and *rāgānugā bhakti*.

## Vaikhānasa Āgama

The Vaikhānasa school of Vaiṣṇavism claims its origin from the sage Vikhanas or Brahma, the Creator himself. The Vaikhānasas are primarily a community of temple priests, and the mode of their worship is essentially oriented towards Vishnu. The Vaikhānasa Grhya Sūtras prescribe for the householders a daily worship involving the fabrication of an image of Vishnu. All gods and goddesses are supposed to be worshipped in Vishnu.<sup>4</sup> To the Vaikhānasas, Vishnu is the Supreme Being, the highest principle. He has two aspects: *sakala* (with form) and *niṣkala* (without form). The *niṣkala* as-

pect is his essence as all-pervasive Being, while his conditioned presence (the *sakala* aspect) gracefully responds to devotional intent and meditation. Moksha is release into Vishnu's abode, called Vaikuṇṭha. It can be attained by the practice of japa (devoted repetition of a mantra or prayer), *hūta* (sacrifice), *archanā* (service to the image), and dhyana (meditation conforming to a yogic regimen). Four types of moksha have been described: *sālokya* (to live in the abode of God), *sāmīpya* (to live near God), *sārūpya* (to have a form akin to that of God), and *sāyujya* (being united with or merged in God). The last one is considered the ultimate moksha. The Vaikhāṇasa treatises speak of four abodes of Vishnu: Āmoda, Pramoda, Sammoda, and Vaikuṇṭha, where Viṣṇu, Mahā Viṣṇu, Sadā Viṣṇu, and Nārāyaṇa respectively preside. Among the four sadhanas, *archanā* has been declared the highest by *Marichi Samhita*. By means of *archanā* one can enter Vaikuṇṭha, the abode of Narayana, and enjoy eternal bliss.

### Pāñcarātra Āgama

Pāñcarātra Āgama prescribes worship of Narayana. The Pāñcarātra tradition follows both *vaidhī* and *rāgānugā* bhakti. The term Pāñcarātra can be traced to the Pāñcarātra yajna (a sacrifice spread over five nights) described in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*.<sup>5</sup> The *Ahīrbudhnyā Samhita* says that Narayana himself composed the Pāñcarātra Tantra and there explained the secret of his five forms: Para (the transcendent), Vyūha (the primary emanation), Vibhabha (subsequent manifestation—as avatars), Antaryāmin (the indweller within individuals) and Arcā (the divine manifestation within consecrated images).

The Pāñcarātra tradition of Vaiṣṇavism and the Nārāyaṇīya section in the Śāntiparvan of the Mahabharata have great similarity. The primary aim of the Pāñcarātra tradition is *prapatti* or *śaraṇāgati* (self-surrender), and the path is therefore called *ekāntika* (with but one aim). According to Pāñcarātrikas, *śaraṇāgati* or total resignation is the main method of contemplation.

### The Common Contemplative Tradition of Vai avism

Vaiṣṇavism is in the main a tradition of bhakti. This bhakti has been defined and explained in different ways by different teachers. Unmotivated devotion (*ahaitukī bhakti*) to God is preached in the Bhagavata: 'Sa vai puṁsām paro dharmo yato bhaktir-adhokṣaje, ahaituky-apratihatā yaya' *tmā samprasīdati*; That is the highest religion of humanity from which arises motiveless and uninterrupted devotion to God that fills the soul with bliss.<sup>6</sup> The *Narada Pancharatra* defines bhakti as the realization that God alone is 'mine' (truly one's own), accompanied by divine love (*preman*) and devoid of attachment to any worldly object. In later Vaiṣṇava tradition a distinction is drawn between bhakti and *preman*. Bhakti is spontaneous attachment for God, being entirely possessed by and absorbed in him. *Preman* is the most concentrated form of this love, characterized by that intense attachment to God which purifies the heart completely. *Preman* is the culmination and fulfilment of bhakti, its utmost perfection. This is also the basis of the two divisions: *vaidhī* or *sādhana bhakti* (ritual devotion) and *rāgānugā* or *premā bhakti* (the devotion consequent upon intense attachment).

### Spirit of Renunciation in Vai avism

Although there are exceptions, formal renunciation is not an important component of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. The renunciation practised by its adherents manifests more as an indifferent attitude towards worldly objects that are obstacles to one-pointed or single-minded love for God. This is called *yukta vairāgya* (detachment proper): 'Anāsaktasya viśayān yathārham-upayunñjataḥ, nirbandhaḥ kṛṣṇa-sambandhe yuktaṁ vairāgyam-ucyate'; That detachment which is characterized by acceptance of only those objects that are not detrimental to devotion and which is accompanied by a desire to associate with Krishna is termed *yukta vairāgya*.<sup>7</sup> This is in contrast to *phalgu vairāgya* (feeble detachment): 'Prāpañcikatayā buddhyā hari-sambandhi-vastunaḥ, mumukṣubhiḥ parityāgo vairāgyam phalgu kathy-



ate; Renunciation of all objects—even those related to Krishna himself, knowing them to be worldly—by seekers of salvation is termed *phalgu vairāgya* (1.2.254). This is the spirit of renunciation of those who tread on the path of knowledge. Vaiṣṇava devotees generally practise *yukta vairāgya*. Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu exemplified an uncompromising spirit of renunciation, and so did his direct disciples like Rūpa, Sanātana, and Jīva Gosvāmi.

### Sannyasins and Householders and their Sacraments

The Vaiṣṇava movement comprises both sannyasin and householder traditions. Each has a tradition of teacher-pupil succession (*paramparā*), maintained by the process of *dikṣā* (initiation with a mantra). On being initiated into the sect (*sampradāya*) the disciple undertakes to abide by the values of the tradition and the community. He or she receives a mantra of Vishnu or Krishna (and in case of renunciants a new name) in accordance with the traditional *iṣṭa* (Chosen Deity) of the particular *sampradāya*. All Vaiṣṇavas must mark their forehead with sandalwood *tilaka* (a holy mark in the form of an extended ‘U’) and other sacred marks—signs of Vishnu’s insignia—on different parts of the body: arms, nose, chest, and the like. A body without these marks is considered ‘as inauspicious as a carcass’. All initiated Vaiṣṇavas are also expected to wear a string of beads made from the stem of tulsi (the holy basil) around their necks, have a rosary for japa (repeating the divine name), and wear a *śikhā* (a knotted tuft of hair on the back of the head).

### The Marks of Vaidhī Bhakti

Vaidhī bhakti has nine aspects (*navalakṣanā* or *navadhā*): listening to the name and glories of the Lord, chanting his holy name, constant remembrance, service, worship, salutation, servitude, friendship, and self-surrender—all directed to Vishnu: ‘*Śravaṇaṁ kīrtanaṁ viśṇoḥ smaraṇaṁ pādasevanam, arcanam vandanaṁ dāsyam sakhyam ātmanivedanam*.’<sup>8</sup> These nine ways of worshipping Vishnu are followed by all the Vaiṣṇava schools as

*vaidhī bhakti*. Each school has its own approach, emphasizing one or more of these aspects. According to Nārada, dedication of all actions to the Lord and extreme yearning on forgetting him are marks of devotion. The lineage of Parāśara holds that attachment to worship and other rituals is the mark of bhakti. Garga maintains that speaking of His glories is the sign of devotion. Śāṇḍilya holds that love for the Self is bhakti. Another aspect of devotion especially stressed in the Vaiṣṇava tradition is association with and service to devotees of the Lord. The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas hold that to have utmost taste for taking the Lord’s name, compassion towards all jivas (living beings), and service to devotees (initiated Vaiṣṇavas) are the means to as well as marks of devotion. But it is *śaraṇāgati* that is most important for a Vaiṣṇava spiritual aspirant. This *śaraṇāgati* has six aspects: (i) resolve to subordinate one’s will to the divine will, (ii) avoidance of all that is contrary to His will, (iii) firm faith that the Lord is the saviour of all, (iv) acceptance of the protective grace of the Lord, (v) total surrender to Him, and (vi) awareness of one’s poverty (of spirit): ‘*Ānukūlyasya samkalpaḥ prātikūlyasya varjanam, rakṣiṣyatīti viśvāsa goptṛtvavarāṇaṁ tathā; ātmanikṣepakārpaṇye śadvidhā śaraṇāgatiḥ*.’ *Vaidhī bhakti* is further categorized into three groups according to the three *guṇas*: *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika*.

### Rāgānugā or Premā Bhakti

The highest form of devotion is that which transcends all the three *guṇas*. It is love for love’s sake alone. It is a spontaneous and uninterrupted inclination of the mind towards the Lord without even the desire for liberation (*mukti*). It is supreme bhakti, or *preman*—intense, uninterrupted, unalloyed, and motiveless love towards God, which leads to God-realization.

This *preman* surpasses all other types of bhakti. Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘The mature stage of bhakti is bhāva. When one attains it one remains speechless, thinking of Satchidānanda. The feeling of an ordinary man can go only that far. When bhāva ripens

it becomes mahābhāva. Prema is the last.<sup>9</sup> When love towards God is intensified, a sweet relationship is established between God and the devotee. This *rāgātmikā* or *rāgānugā bhakti* manifests in five different attitudes (*bhāvas*): *śānta* (calm), *dāsya* (serviceful), *sakhya* (friendly), *vātsalya* (parental), and *madhura* (amorous). Several sentiments go to make each attitude, and each *bhāva* subsumes the sentiments inherent in the preceding attitude. For instance, in *śānta bhāva* the devotees enjoy divine bliss through meditation on the transcendental beauty of the Deity and adore him with all their hearts' devotion. When this love matures into a personal or relational love, the devotees serve the Deity much like a servant serves the master. This stage of love includes *sneha* (affection), *pranaya* (friendship), *māna* (pique), and *rāga* (attachment). A servant enjoys both the wealth (*aiśvarya*) and sweet affection (*mādhurya*) of the Lord. Next the devotee approaches even nearer and loves the Deity as a friend (*sakhā*). This type of love includes *anurāga* (love as a constant freshness) in addition to the sentiments mentioned earlier. When love rises to a still higher level it manifests as parental affection (*vātsalya*) for the beloved. All the qualities inherent in friendly love are further intensified and awareness of *aiśvarya* is dispelled; only *mādhurya* prevails. Up to this stage of parental love, the bhakti is relational (*sambandhātmikā*). When the last vestige of remoteness of the Deity vanishes from the mind of the devotee, two more mental states become manifest: *bhāva* (intoxication) and *mahābhāva* (supreme love-intoxication). The personality of the lover merges with the Beloved. The lover concentrates his or her whole being on the Beloved and becomes united with the Deity in spirit. This is the highest consummation of love for God. This has been described as amorous love (*kāmātmikā*), which is considered the highest form of contemplation in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. The devotees of this grade do not want liberation or anything other than divine communion—enjoying the absolute sweetness (*mādhurya*) of the Lord. This is the culmination of *preman*, the purest love for the beloved. The state where separation is overcome

and total union between the devotee and the Beloved takes place is *mahābhāva*. The deep impact of this experience affects the entire being—the mind, body, and soul of the devotee. It manifests externally as the *sāttvika vikāras* (unaffected emotions), which are recognized to be eight in number: *sveda* (perspiration), *stambha* (stupor), *romāñca* (horripilation), *svara-bhaṅga* (broken voice), *vaivarṇya* (pallor), *āśru* (tears), *vepathu* (tremor), and *pralaya* (loss of consciousness). These manifestations take place only when the mind becomes extremely pure and totally free from all worldliness. Sri Rāma-krishna has pointed out that 'the ordinary jīva does not experience mahābhāva or prema. He goes only as far as bhāva' (255).

There are many sects among the Vaiṣṇavas. We shall now take a brief look at some of them and see how they have adapted and developed these general ideas on contemplation.

### Śrīvai avism and Rāmānuja

Nāthamuni is traditionally considered the founder of the Śrisampradāya (that is how this school is referred to in North India), and Yāmunācharya the first *ācārya*. But it was Rāmānuja who established this school on a firm footing.

**Bhakti:** According to the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, bhakti is realizing one's ultimate relationship with the Lord as his eternal servant. This relationship generates love for and attachment to him. Rāmānuja also equates bhakti with dhyana and *upāsana*. Dhyana is the concentration of the mind on the Deity, and *upāsana*, continuous thought of Him or Her. Bhakti has two stages: *sādhana-bhakti* (bhakti as means, i.e. ritual devotion) and *phala-bhakti* or *sādhya-bhakti* (bhakti as fruit). *Sādhana-bhakti* aims to inculcate strong faith in the Deity as the highest value and a sense of the utter transitoriness of worldly achievements. *Sādhya-bhakti* is being established in love for God, as a servant loves the master. This is the means to mukti. To achieve *sādhya-bhakti*, one must go through a seven-fold culture (*sādhana saptaka*): (i) *viveka*, discrimination regarding what ought to be accepted and what to be given



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up, especially in relation to food; (ii) *vimoka*, control of passions like anger, jealousy, and lust; (iii) *abhyāsa*, practice of disciplines like worship, japa, chanting the names of God, and pilgrimage, in order to maintain a constant memory of God as the indwelling principle (*śeṣin*) within oneself as well as in the whole universe; (iv) *kriya*, the five-fold works or sacrifices—to gods and goddesses through *agnihotra* (fire sacrifice) and other rituals, to the rishis through scriptural study, to one's ancestors, to human beings, and to other living beings (*bhūtas*) through appropriate offerings; (v) *kalyāṇa*, virtuous conduct, consisting in practising virtues like *satya* (truth), *ārjava* (straightforwardness), *dayā* (compassion), *dāna* (charity), and *ahiṃsā* (non-injury); (vi) *anavasāda*, freedom from despair, dejection, pessimism, and the like, and maintenance of a cheerful and positive attitude of mind; and (vii) *anuddharṣa*, absence of exultation or excitement, maintaining an even temperament in all situations.

**Prapatti:** By long and continued practice of these disciplines, one is established on the plane of *vaidhī bhakti* consisting of *dhyana* and *upāsana*. Thereafter the aspirant ascends to the plane of *paramā bhakti* (supreme devotion), maintaining in oneself the knowledge that one is merely a *śeṣa* (a minute part of the whole, which is the Deity) and that the Deity is the *śeṣin* (the whole). *Paramā bhakti* is identical with *prapatti* (resignation). This state of being an eternal servant of the Lord is itself the highest goal. The idea of identification with the Supreme Being is not acceptable to the Śrīvaiṣṇava. According to this tradition the Supreme Being or Puruṣottama is by nature devoid of all blemish and is full of limitless, unsurpassable, and countless auspicious qualities: '*nirasta-nikhiladoṣa-ṇava-dhikātiśayāsāṅkhyeya-kalyāṇaḥ*'.<sup>10</sup>

### Other Vaiṣṇava Traditions

The theological traditions of the other Vaiṣṇava sects in South India have resemblance to the one developed by Rāmānuja, albeit with noteworthy variations. Teachers like Madhva, Valabha, Nimbārka, and others also incorporated Rāmānuja's ideas in their philosophies. Madhva too did not accept the Advaitic concept of *jīvanmukti* or *nirvāṇa mukti*. According to him, *mukti* is the attainment of *Vaikuṇṭha*, the abode of Vishnu (*sālokya*), and attainment of a form similar to the Deity (*sārūpya*). *Mukti* or salvation is attained only by the grace of Vishnu, and even after *mukti* the *jiva* remains the servant of the Lord. Ishvara and *jiva* are distinct entities. *Bhakti*, the only means of salvation, leads to the direct perception of the Deity. By performing proper worship a



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person becomes competent for *bhakti*. This worship includes: *aṅkana* (marking the body with holy symbols), *nāmakaraṇa* (naming children and other objects of love with holy names), and *bhajana* (service). *Bhajana* again is of three types: *kāyika* (physical), *vācika* (verbal), and *mānasika* (mental). *Kāyika bhajana* includes *dāna* (charity), *paritrāṇa* (acts of deliverance), and *parirakṣana* (acts of protection). *Vācika bhajana* includes *satyakathana* (speaking the truth), *hitavākya kathana* (beneficial counsel), *priyavākya kathana* (sweet and gentle speech), and *svādhyāya* (study of scriptures). *Mānasika bhajana* comprises *dayā* (compassion), *spṛhā* (desire for service to God), and *śraddhā* (faith in the guru and scriptures). Through these devotional practices mediate knowledge is gained; this helps the growth of *bhakti*, which in turn results in enlightenment. This leads to a very ripe devotion which, in turn, leads to liberation—eternal servitude to God.

### The Vāllabha Tradition

Although the school founded by Vallabhācharya accepts the Vedas, the Bhagavadgita, and the *Narada Pancharatra* as scripture, its primary authority is the Bhagavata Purana, because this text is directly related to Krishna. For Vallabha, Sri Krishna is the Satcid-ananda Parabrahman, also called Puruṣottama, even when present in his pastoral aspect as the cowherd boy of Vraja. Vallabha, however, does not accept the reality of Rādhā as in the Vrindavan Vaiṣṇava tradition and the Gauḍīya tradition. According to Vallabha the highest type of jiva is *puṣṭi jīva*, the spiritually nourished jiva. This concept of *puṣṭi* is derived from the Bhagavata: '*poṣaṇam tadanugrahaḥ; poṣaṇa* is his grace.'<sup>11</sup> This is why Vallabha's system of philosophy is called Puṣṭi Mārga. One may practise bhakti rigorously, but divine grace is nonetheless the last word and the *summum bonum* of life. A *puṣṭi jīva* prefers to serve the Lord, even eschewing mukti. *Bhajanānanda* (the joy of devotional adoration) is infinitely superior to *brahmānanda* (the bliss of Brahman), and this can be had



Sri Vallabhacharya

through service to Krishna, the Pūrṇa Puruṣottama (the Supreme Being totally manifest). To attain this privilege, the disciplines of nine-fold bhakti mentioned earlier have been prescribed. When this bhakti matures, the devotee enters into a transcendental state in this very life and gets a spiritual body in the life beyond, in order to be perpetually engaged in the divine service of the Lord.

### Early Medieval Vaiṣṇava Schools

Many other Vaiṣṇava devotees called saints preached the doctrine of love throughout India. Several sects have preserved the traditions they founded. These include the sects of Nimbārka, Rāmānanda, and Samartha Rāmdās, the Vārkarīpantha (worshippers

of Viṭṭhala or Viṭhobā of Pandharpur, including Nāmadeva, Eknāth, Tukārām, and Janābai among others); and smaller sects associated with Haridās and Dādu. Jñāneśvara blended bhakti with Advaita Vedanta in *Jñaneshvāri*, his commentary on the Bhagavadgita. The other saints have stressed bhakti as the path to God-realization and advocated singing the name of the Lord and chanting his praise. These saints accepted and preached the path of pure devotion (*premā bhakti*), considering God a loving parent or master rather than as the divine lover of the Bhāgavata or Gauḍīya tradition. An exception was Mīrābāi; she practised and preached *rāgānugā bhakti* (passionate love) towards the Lord, viewing him as lover.



Mirabai

### Gauḍīya and Bhāgavata Tradition

The Gauḍīya tradition of bhakti is based on the theology of the Bhagavata and the *Narada Pancharatra*. The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas are worshippers of Rādhā and Krishna. The person of Rādhā does not find mention in the Bhagavata. This concept is derived from the *Narada Pancharatra*, where Pārvatī, the divine consort of Shiva, says: '*Tadrāse dhāraṇādrādhā vidvadbhīḥ parikīrtitā*; I held you in *rāsa* (divine play), that is why I am known as Rādhā by those in the know.'<sup>12</sup> *Gopīs*, the milkmaids of Vraja, are the embodiments of amorous love. The aggregate of this love of the *gopīs* is Rādhā, the embodiment of *mahābhāva*, the manifestation of *hlādinī* (the power of divine beatitude), which is one of the components of God's *svarūpa śakti* (intrinsic powers).

This concept of Rādhā is a dominant theme in Vrindavan. The highest aspect of *mahābhāva*, known as *mādana* or maddening delight, is possessed only by Rādhā and none else, not even by Krishna.<sup>13</sup> The delight Rādhā derives thereby is so

immensely superior to what Krishna enjoys as the object of her love and is so irresistibly tempting, that Krishna cannot suppress his eagerness to taste his own charms and sweetness as Rādhā does. Accordingly, there is an aspect of Krishna in which all the attributes of the Krishna of Vrindavan as well as those of Rādhā coexist.<sup>14</sup> In this aspect, Krishna, as the subject of *mādana*, relishes his own charms and sweetness. Caitanya Mahāprabhu (or Śrī Gaurāṅga), is considered to be this dual form—Krishna and Rādhā embodied in one frame—by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas. So it is their custom to worship Gaurāṅga and his companions before worshipping Krishna.

The highest privilege for a jiva is to serve the Lord with *madhura rati* (amorous attachment) and be united with him, while maintaining one's individuality, or while maintaining an idea of separation of Puruṣa and Prakṛti (in Vaiṣṇava theology—



Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

minates in *mahābhāva*. In this state separation is removed and total union prevails; the aspirant enters into the supreme state of divine ecstasy and becomes one with the beloved, enjoying the absolute *mādhurya* of Krishna. In this state Krishna is looked upon as the nearest and dearest, nay—the person of the devotee is totally merged into that of Krishna, who is Narayana of Goloka, the *advaya jñāna-tattva vastu*, the unique or non-dual essence of knowledge.

### Sahajiyā and Śa karadeva Traditions

The Sahajiyā sect developed in the train of the Caitanya movement, though it is virtually extinct at present. Its practice involved *madhura bhāva* as *parakiyā sādhana*, having a person of the opposite sex, other than one's spouse, as companion for one's sādhana. An aspirant practises looking upon his or her paramour as an embodiment of Rādhā or Krishna to foster divine love.

Important exponents of the Gauḍīya tradition include Rūpa, Sanātana, and Jīva Gosvāmi. Among more recent traditions, the Svāmīnārāyaṇa group bears resemblance to the South Indian tradition of Vaiṣṇavism, while ISKCON, the Hare Krishna school, follows the Gauḍīya tradition. The ISKCON followers emphasize keeping count on the rosary (*japa mālā*) while repeating the holy name, and consider the Bhagavata, the Gita, and the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* their main scriptures. In Northeast India, Śaṅkaradeva has a large Vaiṣṇava following. This group considers the Bhagavata as the embodiment of Krishna, and worships it as such. They usually do not worship images, but otherwise follow Gauḍīya theology. They follow the teachings of the Bhagavata, which prescribes the Kaliyuga method of worshipping the Supreme Being through *kīrtana*, identifying him with Krishna and Rama,

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*I will build a funeral pyre of sandalwood  
and aloe;  
light it by Your own hand.  
When I am burned away to cinders,  
smear this ash upon Your limbs.  
... let flame be lost in flame. —Mirabai*

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cal terms). To attain this state one needs to practise thinking of oneself as a young *gopī*, beautifully dressed, attending on Rādhā in her love-pastimes with Krishna, being the principal subordinate to Rūpamañjarī, the chief among Rādhā's attendants (known as *mañjarīs*). Similar is the mode of meditation for devotees with other *ratīs* (2.22.91).

But this is not possible for novices. So they are to prepare themselves by following the disciplines of *vaidhī bhakti* and *navadhā bhakti* mentioned earlier. Thereafter, the aspirant is expected to develop the sentiments inherent in the *śānta*, *dāsyā*, *sakhya*, and *vātsalya* attitudes (*sneha*, *prañaya*, and the like). When the aspirant feels a deep attraction for and cannot bear separation from Krishna, he or she is established in *bhāva*. When this too ripens, the aspirant is established in the attitude of a *gopī* (*gopī bhāva siddha*), which, in select aspirants, cul-

and addressing him as Mahāpuruṣa.<sup>15</sup> Thus the Puruṣottama of the Gita is the Mahāpuruṣa of the Bhagavata, and the theology of Śaṅkaradeva is known as Mahāpuruṣiṃyā Dharma. *Kīrtana*, the main method of worship, is also called *nāma-dharma*. Just as the Gita enjoins giving up all duties and the practice of implicit resignation to the Lord,<sup>16</sup> Śaṅkaradeva also lays great stress on *eka śaraṇa* (surrender to the one Lord), which gives the school its other epithet *eka śaraṇiṃyā*. The concept of mukti is not given much importance by this sect, and it does not accept *madhura bhāva* or the *Rādhā* and *gopī* concepts of Caitanya and the Bhāgavata school.



Sri Shankaradeva

### Sri Ramakrishna on Vaiśava Bhakti

According to Sri Ramakrishna, in this Kaliyuga devotion as prescribed by Nārada is the way to God-realization. This involves intense love for God and total indifference towards everything contrary to God; and this is developed by singing the names and glories of God. Ramakrishna says that two things are essential to realize God: simplicity and yearning. It is necessary to establish a close relationship with God and impress deeply on the mind the idea that God is one's very own. Knowing this, one must take refuge in God and develop an intense attachment for him/her. He says, 'God reveals Himself to a devotee who feels drawn to Him by the combined force of these three attractions: the attractions of worldly possessions for the worldly man, the child's attraction for its mother, and the husband's attraction for the chaste wife.'<sup>17</sup> He prescribes four aids to contemplation: (i) association with holy persons, (ii) solitude, (iii) discrimination (between the real and the unreal, to develop the conviction that God alone is real and all else unreal), and (iv) prayer for genuine faith and love

for God. He declares that God realization is the sole aim of human life, and that a still higher aim is to love God with all one's heart and soul but without any ulterior motive. Mukti is a secondary matter for Ramakrishna, and is inferior to bhakti. The culmination of all knowledge is the realization that the same (and one) God has become the jivas, the universe, and all its components; it is to experience God in every thing and in every being. This is also the highest state of bhakti according to Vaiṣṇava theology. Hari Om. PB

*The image of Madhvacharya is courtesy of Ramakrishna Mission, Chengalpattu; other images in this article are courtesy of Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad.*

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15. Bhagavata, 11.5.32-34.
16. Bhagavadgita, 18.66.
17. *Gospel*, 83.

*O mind, meditate on Mura's adversary;  
O hands, be clasped in the worship of Sridhara;  
O ears, hear the great deeds of Achyuta;  
O eyes, be fixed on Krishna;  
O feet, go to the temple of Hari;  
O nose, smell the tulsi at the feet of Mukunda;  
O head, bow down to Adhokshaja.*

—Kulashekhara Alvar, *Mukundamala*

## The Śākta Contemplative Tradition

Swami Vimalatmananda

THE worship of Shakti has a unique place in the religious and spiritual life of the Indian people. Shakti is Power, Energy—the active principle of the universe which is personified as Goddess. Every form of activity—however it be named—proceeds from the primordial Shakti. Shakti pervades the entire universe. It is worshipped as Devi, or the Divine Mother. This worship is popularly known as Shakti Puja; people have been performing Shakti Puja from time immemorial. Dr Pushpendu Kumar has rightly observed:

It can be seen through the different phenomena of life itself. Durgā Sapta Śati says, ‘yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śakti rūpeṇa samsthitā’, i.e. every one of us has inherent power called Śakti, which is a part and manifestation of Parā Śakti, the Supreme Goddess. The powers of gods came to be known and worshipped by the different names and epithets—the Vaiṣṇavī Śaktis like Lakṣmī, Śrī, Pṛthivī etc. and Śaiva Śaktis like Durgā, Pārvatī, Kālī, and so on. The trinity of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva work through their Śaktis for the creation, maintenance and annihilation of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The Divine Mother is very important to Hindu religion and spirituality. She commands as much respect and worship in India as the other gods and incarnations. There are numerous shrines across the country dedicated to the various forms of the Divine Mother. Feasts and festivities in her honour are an important component of the national calendar. Nowhere in the religious and spiritual history of the world do we find this worship of the Divine Mother so prominent as in India.

### Śāktism and the Śākta

The worshippers of Shakti are called Śāktas. The Śāktas have their own beliefs, doctrines, tradition, symbols, cult, myths, and rituals. These constitute

Śāktism, the religion of the Śāktas. According to this tradition, the highest reality is the Divine Mother, the personification of primordial energy, the controller of all forces, the power behind divine and cosmic evolution, and the source of all that exists. Śāktism is based on Vedic mantras and Upanishadic philosophy. It has been propagated by Advaita Vedantins including Acharya Shankara. According to this tradition, Shakti is identical with Brahman. Shakti and *śaktimān* (the locus of shakti) are one.

The Puranas mention the prevalence of Śāktism during various historical periods, beginning with Vedic times. But it gained prominence in the epic period. In the preface to his monumental book *His-*



Devi Durga, Almora



story of Śākta Religion, Narendranath Bhat-tacharya has rightly observed:

The role of Śāktism changed from time to time in accordance with the changing social demands, from the guiding principle of primitive hunting rituals and agricultural magic to that of movement of national awakening, from the esoteric cults and practices arising out of the former to a liberal universal religion which has left a deep impress upon the latter. In between the two there are many turning points in each of which Śāktism was a driving force standing for something new, owing to its flexible nature which made it subject to various interpretations in different ages and by persons and sects belonging to a variety of ideas and beliefs. It will be significant to observe that throughout the ages the Female Principle stood for the oppressed people, symbolizing all the liberating potentialities in the class-divided, patriarchal and authoritarian social set-up of India, and thus alone explains why attempts were made from different corners to blacken Śākta-Tāntric ideals.

The origin of Śāktism was spontaneous, which evolved out of the pre-historic Mother Goddess cult symbolizing the facts of primitive life. But its development was manifold—not through any particular channel—like a lot of streams, some big some small, issuing from a single source. ... the tribal cults of the female deities were clearly woven in the texture of the intellectual and rational scheme of the doctrine upheld by the higher religions.<sup>2</sup>

A rich Śākta literature has come into being, written by various great saints, sadhakas, and scholars in different languages in Bengal, Assam, Kashmir, the sub-Himalayan region, and South India. Much of this literature is in Sanskrit, and it gives



Devi Kalika, Kalighat

us a vivid description of the Śākta religion. It is commonly held that Śāktism means Tāntrism. Tāntric ideas profoundly influenced different religious sects and radically changed their views as well as their practices. But some scholars hold the opinion that Śāktism and Tantra are two separate entities. The term *Śākta* has a wider import than the appellation

*Tāntric*, and Śākta literature may be traced back to the Vedas, whereas Tāntric literature has a later origin.<sup>3</sup> Dr Winternitz says, 'When we speak of Tantra, we think primarily of the sacred books of the Śāktas.'<sup>4</sup> Sri Ramakrishna explains the issue thus: 'The Śāktas follow the Tantra, and the Vaishnavas the Purāṇa. There is no harm for the Vaishnavas in speaking publicly of their spiritual practices. But the Śāktas maintain secrecy about theirs. For this reason it is difficult to understand a Śākta.'<sup>5</sup>

### The Śākta Philosophy

Śākta teachings were originally passed on from teacher to student, guru to śiṣya, in an esoteric manner; so these teachings remained uncoded for long. Over the last several centuries, many Śākta sadhakas and scholars have contributed to the progress of Śākta philosophy. The 'knowledge portion' of *Tripura-rahasya* throws much light on Śākta philosophy. The *Sri-vidya-ratna-sutra* attributed to Acharya Gaudapada is a useful Śākta text. Abhinavagupta's works established Śākta philosophy on a firm foundation. Punyananda's *Kamakalavilasa* is an authoritative work on Śākta philosophy. The best exposition of Śākta philosophy is probably Bhaskararaya's *Setubandha*, dated to the eighteenth century. Sir John Woodroffe and his associates elaborately expounded the Śākta philosophy

during the first three decades of twentieth century. In 1937 Panchanan Tarkaratna expounded the *Brahma Sutra* and *Isha Upanishad* from the Śākta viewpoint. This attempt was furthered by Mahamahopadhyaya Gopinath Kaviraj. Though originally based on Sāṅkhya philosophy, Śākta philosophy has been deeply influenced by the non-dualistic school of Vedānta. It however shares its terminology with the other schools of Indian philosophy.

In Śākta philosophy, the ultimate reality is pure Consciousness, known as *Saṁvit*. It is an independent entity, and its power is responsible for all activity. It has static and dynamic aspects: *prakāśa* and *vimarśa*. It is both immanent and transcendent. *Saṁvit* remains as pure *cit-śakti* (consciousness-power)—also termed *Parā-Prakṛti*—at the time of dissolution of the universe. Shakti manifests itself as *avidyā* or material *prakṛti* when material entities evolve.

The evolution of the material world from pure Consciousness has been conceived as taking place in three stages—the seed stage, the mixed stage, and the final stage. In the seed stage, matter has not yet appeared as different from consciousness. The mixed stage manifests subtle differences between consciousness and matter. The final stage is the gross world as we see it. This evolution involves four categories—Parameshvara, Shakti, Para-nāda, and Parā-bindu. Parameshvara is the Supreme Being with whom Shakti is in inseparable relation. The appearance of Shakti causes an unmanifested sound called Para-nāda which concentrates itself to a point called Parā-bindu. This Parā-bindu evolves into three parts—Aparā-bindu, Bīja, and Aparā-nāda. The Shiva element dominates in the Aparā-bindu and the Shakti element in the Bīja. In Aparā-nāda, Shiva-Shakti are in equilibrium. The sound caused by the division of Parā-bindu is called Śabda Brahman. The inseparable Shakti of the Supreme Being in the modes of *icchā* (will) and *kriyā* (functioning) is responsible for these transformations.

Shakti first manifests as *icchā*, the desire to create. Subsequently, it works through its two aspects: *vidyā-śakti* and *avidyā-śakti* or *māyā-śakti*. Both of

these are conscious principles—the former is illuminating consciousness, the latter, veiled consciousness. *Māyā-śakti* is composed of the three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. It is therefore known as *triguṇā-śakti* or *kāmakalā*, and is symbolized by a triangle. So the *māyā-śakti* is the cause of the material world. Maya is not an unconscious principle; it is consciousness veiling itself as the shakti of the Supreme Being. Sri Ramakrishna has explained this with simple analogies: ‘He whom you address as Brahma[n] is none other than She whom I call Śakti, the Primal Energy’ (434). ‘Thus Brahman and Śakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power

to burn. If you see the fire, you must recognize its power to burn also. You cannot think of fire without its power to burn, nor can you think of the power to burn without fire. You cannot conceive of the sun’s rays without the sun, nor can you conceive of the sun without its rays’ (134).



Shivachandra Vidyarnava

Shivachandra Vidyarnava, Gopinath Kaviraj, and John Woodroffe have extensively interpreted the Śākta Philosophy. Narendra Nath Bhattacharya has summed them up succinctly:

The Supreme Being of Shaktism is not a personal God. In its own nature, it is more than that. The Shakta point of view considers the reality of God as the cause of the universe. But it holds that while the effect as effect is the cause modified, the cause as cause remains what it was, what it is, and what it will be. It holds that the Supreme Being is manifested in one of its aspects in an infinity of relations, and though involving all relations within itself, is neither their sum total nor exhausted by them. Shakti, which is its functional aspect, works by negation, contraction, and finitisation. As a Mother Power she upholds herself into the world and again withdraws the world into

herself. The purpose of her worship is to attain unity with her forms and this is the experience of liberation—a state of great bliss (*anandaghana*). In the natural order of development, Shakti is developed in worldly things but it is controlled by religious sadhana, which both prevents an excess of worldliness and moulds the mind and disposition (*bhava*) into a form which develops the knowledge of dispassion and non-attachment. Sadhana is a means whereby bondage becomes liberation.<sup>6</sup>

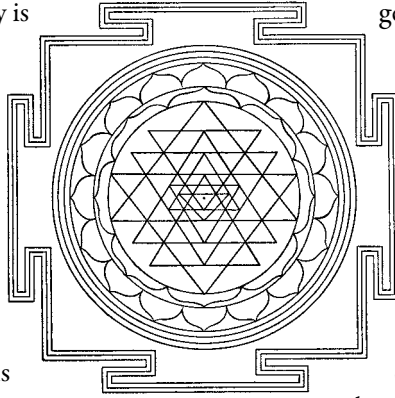
### Śākta Sadhana

We have discussed the philosophical basis of Śākta religion. This philosophy is to be practised and realized. This practice is called sadhana. This is Śākta contemplation, the practical aspect of the Śākta tradition. Contemplation is achieved through spiritual discipline. Only then is spiritual liberation possible, and will the sadhaka enjoy eternal peace.

This is called *śākta sādhanā*. This sadhana has some distinctive features, although, truly speaking, all sadhanas are essentially Śākta sadhana. This sadhana is open to all men and women according to their competence and constitution. It has many stages and categories. The sadhaka is to choose his or her own path with the aid of a guru.

The Śāktas give much importance to the physical constitution. According to them, realization is difficult if the sadhaka does not have a suitable physique. The body is full of various energies; the aim of sadhana is to master and manifest these energies.

Śākta sadhana is actually the practice of Advaita, for it is also the path of jñāna. It first involves indirect or scriptural knowledge, *śāstra jñāna*. Direct perception follows. Though this sadhana involves knowledge, bhakti and karma are given equal importance. Generally speaking, in this sadhana, jñāna, bhakti, and karma have been harmonized.



*Ācāra* and *bhāva* are the basis of Shakti sadhana. In the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, Shiva says : 'Devi, I have told of many *ācāras* and *bhāvas* in accordance with the capacity of the *adhikarī* (aspirant). Among these, some are secret; I have narrated these too (in some other Tantras). Persons competent in (esoteric as well as exoteric) sadhana will get results and cross the ocean of samsara if they follow this path.'<sup>7</sup>

Śākta teachers class human disposition under three heads—*paśu bhāva*, *vīra bhāva*, and *divya bhāva*. The person with *paśu bhāva* or animal disposition is slave to six enemies: lust, anger, greed, pride, delusion, and envy.

An aspirant with *vīra bhāva* or fearless disposition is pure in motive, gentle in speech, and mindful of the *pañca tattvas* (discussed below). Such a person is physically strong, courageous, intelligent, and enterprising. The character of the person with *divya bhāva* borders on the divine as a result of sadhana practised in previous births.

Sri Ramakrishna tells a charming story about *śava sādhanā*, the prototypal *vīra bhāva* worship, and about sadhana done in previous births:

One must admit the existence of tendencies inherited from previous births. There is a story about a man who practised the *śava sādhanā*. He worshipped the Divine Mother in a deep forest. First he saw many terrible visions. Finally a tiger attacked and killed him. Another man, happening to pass and seeing the approach of the tiger, had climbed a tree. Afterwards he got down and found all the arrangements for worship at hand. He performed some purifying ceremonies and seated himself on the corpse. No sooner had he done a little japa than the Divine Mother appeared before him and said: 'My child, I am very much pleased with you. Accept a boon from Me.' He bowed low at the Lotus Feet of the Goddess and said: 'May I ask You one question, Mother? I am speechless with amazement at Your action. The

other man worked so hard to get the ingredients for Your worship and tried to propitiate You for such a long time, but You didn't condescend to show him Your favour. And I, who don't know anything of worship, who have done nothing, who have neither devotion nor knowledge nor love, and who haven't practised any austerities, am receiving so much of Your grace.' The Divine Mother said with a laugh: 'My child, you don't remember your previous births. For many births you tried to propitiate Me through austerities. As a result of those austerities all these things have come to hand and you have been blessed with My vision. Now ask Me your boon.'<sup>8</sup>

There are seven *ācāras* or rules of conduct, which are related to the spiritual states of the sadhaka—*vedācāra*, *vaiṣṇavācāra*, *śaivācāra*, *dakṣiṇācāra*, *vāmācāra*, *siddhāntācāra*, and *kaulācāra*. These *ācāras* are closely connected with *bhāvas*. Atal Behari Ghosh has presented a succinct overview of these *ācāras* in his scholarly article 'The Spirit and Culture of the Tantras':

The aspirant rises step by step through these different *ācāras* till he reaches the seventh and highest stage, when Brahman becomes an experiential reality to him. In the first stage, cleanliness of the body and mind is cultivated. The second stage is that of devotion (*bhakti*). The third is that of *jñāna* (knowledge). *Dakṣiṇa*, which is the fourth stage, is that in which the gains acquired in the preceding three stages are consolidated. This is followed by *vāma*, which is the stage of renunciation. This does not mean, as has been said by the detractors of the Tantra, the practice of rites with a woman (*vāmā*). *Vāma* is the reverse of *dakṣiṇa*; it means the path of renunciation. If a woman is at all associated in this practice, she is there to help in the path of renunciation, and not for animal gratification. A woman as such is an object of great veneration to all schools of Tantrika *sādhakas* (seekers). She is considered to be the embodiment on earth of the supreme Śakti who pervades the universe. She should therefore be revered as such and, even if guilty of a hundred wrongs, she is not to be hurt even with a flower. It is a sin to speak disparagingly of any woman. The sixth stage, viz. *siddhānta*, is that in which the

aspirant comes to the definitive conclusion after deliberate consideration as to the relative merits of the path of enjoyment and that of renunciation. By pursuing the latter path, he reaches the final stage of *kaula*. This is the stage in which Kula or Brahman becomes a reality to him. The first three of these seven stages, viz., *veda*, *vaiṣṇava*, and *śaiva* belong to *paśubhāva*; *dakṣiṇa* and *vāma* belong to *vīrabhāva*; and the last two belong to *divyabhāva*. According to some, the last alone is *divyabhāva*. And the *Paraśurāma Kalpa-Sūtra* says that during the first five stages the aspirant must be guided by the teacher, and it is only after he has passed the fifth stage that he is allowed to have freedom of action in every way.<sup>9</sup>

The Śāktas have a set of well-defined rules for worship of the Divine Mother in her various forms—Kali, Durga, Jagaddhatri, and the like. The object of this worship is realization of the supreme Consciousness. This is done through the use of mantras and yantras, and the practices of *nyāsa*, *bhūta-suddhi*, pranayama, dhyana, *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā*, *mānasa*- and *bāhya pūja* [discussed in this issue in 'Worship and Contemplation']. At present, this method forms the basis of worship of all deities. The worshipper seeks to rouse the power of the kundalini (*ādhāraśakti*, the basal power), which is located in the *mulādhāra*, the lowest of the six chakras in the body. Then the worshipper, the worshipped, and the means and acts of worship will be transformed into *caitanya*—Consciousness. The

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*Awake, Mother! Awake! How long Thou  
hast been asleep  
In the lotus of the Muladhara!  
Fulfil Thy secret function, Mother:  
Rise to the thousand-petalled lotus within  
the head,  
Where mighty Shiva has his dwelling;  
Swiftly pierce the six lotuses  
And take away my grief, O Essence of  
Consciousness!* —Dasharathi Ray

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passage of the awakened kundalini through successively higher chakras—*svādhīṣṭhāna*, *maṇipura*,



Ramprasad

*anāhata*, *viśuddha*, and *ājñā*, are accompanied by a progressive transformation of consciousness (and deepening spiritual insight). Its penetration of the *sahasrāra* leads to the ultimate transcendental experience of Conscious-

ness and results in eternal bliss.

Sri Ramakrishna's experiences during the worship of Mother Kali and during his tantric sadhana are graphically recorded by Swami Saradananda in his monumental work *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*. Sri Ramakrishna's experiences closely match the descriptions found in the shastras. For instance, he says, 'I had, in the beginning, the vision of particles of light like groups of fire-flies; I saw sometimes all quarters covered with masses of mist-like light; and at other times I perceived that all things were pervaded by bright waves of light like molten silver.'<sup>10</sup> This is comparable to the description available in *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 2.11.

The *pañca tattvas*, five principles, are an integral part of tantric rites. These are commonly called the five 'm's, *pañca-makāra*—*madya*, wine; *māṃsa*, meat; *matsya*, fish; *mudrā*, cereals, and *maithūna*, sexual union. Sri Ramakrishna practised Tantra sadhana according to the rules of sixty-four different categories of Tantra under the guidance of the Bhairavi Brahmani. He passed through the entire course without deviating from his ideal of 'motherhood in all women' and without taking even a sip of wine. Swami Nirvedananda has recorded the unique significance of Sri Ramakrishna's Tantric sadhana in 'Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance':

During this period, he had quite a multitude of wonderful visions that followed one another in quick succession. Of all the divine forms he

witnessed, Śoḍaśī or Rājārājeśvarī appeared to him to be the loveliest. Moreover, he perceived the upward march of the *kuṇḍalinī-śakti*, described in the Yoga and Tāntrika scriptures as the coiled-up divine energy lying normally in every man at the lower end of the spinal canal. When it is made to rise farther up by spiritual practice, its progress through the different stages is marked by distinct phases of spiritual experience on the part of the devotee, culminating in mergence in the Absolute. Ramakrishna verified the scriptural statements by experiencing all the various spiritual moods and visions corresponding to the different stages of ascent of the coiled-up divine energy.

His unique success in Tāntrika practices, without any connection with wine or sex, has undoubtedly restored the purity of these ancient practices and stamped them afresh as a sure and distinct approach to the realization of God.<sup>11</sup>

### **They Lived with the Divine Mother**

The practice of Śāktism is open to all, to renunciants and householders alike. If one practises the disciplines laid down in the Śākta shastras, one is entitled to the highest spiritual attainments. There are innumerable examples of sadhakas who, by practising Śākta sadhana as per the Śākta shastras, have realized the supreme Consciousness and its manifestation as Shakti. Besides Sri Ramakrishna, some of the other Śākta sadhakas of repute who achieved supreme knowledge by practising Śākta sadhana are Krishnananda Agamavagisha, Raja Ramakrishna, Swami Sarvananda, Kamalakanta, Ramprasad, Bamakshyapa, Brahmananda Giri, Puranananda Paramahansa Parivrajaka, and Shiva-chandra Vidyarnava of Bengal; Nilkantha of Maharashtra; Adyananda of Nepal; Srinivas Bhatta Gosvami of South India; Shivananda Nath of Varanasi; Abhinavagupta and Sahib Kaula of Kashmir; and Gangesha Upadhyaya of Mithila. Their lives and methods of sadhana are very inspiring. They practised sadhana according to Śākta rules and were blessed with the vision of the Divine Mother. Some of them jotted down their experiences; their writings have in course of time become authentic reference works for this tradition. Some of them

are poet saints whose compositions are still inspiring people and elevating the minds of sadhakas to higher states of devotion. Kamalakanta, Ramprasad, and Chandidas of Bengal belong to this group of sadhakas. Sarvananda of Tripura was totally illiterate; his spiritual success came through repetition of the mantra alone. He practised the very difficult *śava sādhanā*. He earned the epithet of *sarvavidyā*, as all known forms of the Divine Mother were revealed to him. Ratnagarbha or Gosain Bhattacharya of sixteenth-century Bengal followed the *vīra* form of worship using *pañca makāra* and attained *siddhi*, perfection. Ardhakali of Mymensingh was born a daughter of Dvijadeva Thakur about three hundred years ago. It is believed that she was an incarnation of the Divine Mother. She was married to Raghavarama, a soul highly advanced in yoga, and at the time of marriage, she revealed her divinity. Bamakshyapa (mad Vama) was born about three hundred years ago in a village of Birbhum. He was a devotee of Goddess Tara, but seldom offered any formal worship. He practised only meditation on Tara and had the vision of the Divine Mother.

Chintacharan Chakravarty has rightly observed that 'the ennobling spirit of devotion and the high tone of spirituality imparted by Śāktism have attracted and are still attracting a very large number of people not only in Bengal, but all over India.'<sup>12</sup>

### In Conclusion

Traditional Śākta sadhana is not much practised today, but the worship of the Divine Mother still plays a vital role in various parts of the country. This worship 'allows for the integration of aspects of human life into a whole, which includes the achievement of a type of *balance* in view of the oft-stated generalization that religious pantheonic structures tend to mirror the socio-political structures of civilizations.'<sup>13</sup> Even from the purely human point of view, this tradition of worship has proved to be remarkably elevating. As W C Beane puts it (*ibid.*): 'Individuals might therefore learn from the testimony

of the worshippers of the goddess that, even if certain ideas and forms of the Tantric vogue may be found unsuitable to certain modern milieux, it is essentially the vision of what both man and woman can become to one another in mutual respect of one another's identity, influence, and activity in the world that matters finally.'



Bamakshyapa

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## Contemplative Practices in Śaivism

Swami Tadananda

THE excavations at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa have revealed that the Śaiva religion is perhaps the most ancient faith in the world. Over the centuries, Śaivism developed many offshoots and appeared in different forms in different parts of the world. In India, there are four main forms of this religio-philosophical movement: Vīraśaivism in South India (mainly Karnataka), Pāśupatism in North India and Nepal, Advaita Śaivism in Kashmir, and the Śaiva-Siddhānta in Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, there are millions of devotees of Shiva all over the country who do not particularly subscribe to any of the above schools of Śaivism. Simple worship and devotion to Shiva characterizes their faith. In this article we shall take a look at the four principal schools of Śaivism.

### Vīraśaivism

Vīraśaivism is a vibrant monotheistic faith, particularly prominent in its homeland—Karnataka. It was made popular by the remarkable religious leader Sri Basaveshvara (1105–67). The Vīraśaiva movement championed the cause of the downtrodden and evolved as a revolt against a system which fostered social inequality. Going against the way of the times, it rejected Vedic authority, caste hierarchy, the system of four stages of life, and veneration of a multiplicity of gods; the concepts of karmic bondage, existence of inner worlds, and the du-

ality of God and soul; temple worship, ritualistic priestcraft, animal sacrifice, and the traditions of ritual purity-pollution.

To a Vīraśaiva, Shiva is the Supreme God, and he is to be worshipped through the *linga*. The *linga* is not an image of Shiva, but Shiva himself. It is described as a great mass of light shining before the eye. Shiva is the *linga* and the *jiva* is the *aṅga* (part); and the main purpose of Vīraśaiva worship is the search for and realization of the devotee's divine oneness with Shiva through the *linga*. This is technically called *lingānusandhāna*, the internal penetration into Shiva through the worship and contemplation of the *linga*. It culminates in *lingaikyatva* when the *aṅga* or *jiva* becomes one with the *Linga* or the Supreme Shiva. To facilitate this union with and final absorption into the

Deity, the Vīraśaiva takes recourse to Vīraśaiva initiation, *aṣṭāvaraṇas* or 'eight aids to faith', and the practice of the Ṣaṭ-sthala Siddhānta philosophy described below.

Diksha (initiation), which opens the door and admits a person into the fold of Vīraśaivism, is considered essential and compulsory for attaining the final goal. It is simultaneous with *lingadhāraṇa* or wearing of the *linga*. Hence the Vīraśaivas are also called Lingayats (bearers of the *linga*.) Shiva resides in the disciple in the form of Consciousness or *caitanya*. It is believed that during the initiation cer-





emony the guru, through his spiritual power, extracts the *caitanya* existing in the body of the pupil and places it in the consecrated linga. The linga is worn encased in a pendant around the neck and worshipped throughout life. The linga must on no account be separated from the body, since such separation is equivalent to spiritual death. Vīraśaivism strongly condemns worship of Shiva in any form other than the *iṣṭalinga* (the personal linga). The guru also supplies the pupil with the eight emblems of faith which stand the devotee in good stead in his spiritual life. These eight aids to spiritual life are obedience to the guru, worship of the linga, reverence for the *jaṅgama* or Vīraśaiva teachers, wearing of the sacred *rudrākṣa* (rosary), use of the holy ash sacred to Shiva, partaking of the guru's prasāda, purification through holy water called *tīrtha*, and repetition of the six-lettered mantra *Om Namaḥ Śivāya*, meaning 'Obeisance to Shiva.' This mantra is to the Śaivas what Gayatri is to the Brahmanas. The Vīraśaivas do not accept any other mantra.

The philosophy of the Vīraśaivas is called the Ṣaṭ-sthala Siddhānta. Its essence is the acceptance of the *ṣaṭ-sthalas*, a progressive six-stage path of devotion and surrender, as the best means of achieving union with Shiva. Beginning with the acute realization of separation from God, the devotee passes through the stages of *bhakta-sthala* (devotion), *mahēśa-sthala* (selfless service), *prasādi-sthala* (earnestly seeking Shiva's grace), *prāṇalīngi-sthala* (experience of all as Shiva), and *śaraṇa-sthala* (egoless refuge in Shiva), and culminates in *aikya-sthala* (oneness with Shiva). Each phase brings the seeker and Shiva closer, until they fuse together in a final state of perpetual Shiva-consciousness, as rivers merging in the ocean. It is insisted that in all these stages the *iṣṭalinga* must be worshipped, and that the *iṣṭalinga* must always serve as the basis of contemplation. A brief description of the *ṣaṭ-sthalas* follows:

In the *bhakta-sthala* stage the individual is offered the *iṣṭalinga* by his guru, who instructs him about the goal and the method of attaining it. The goal is unity with the Deity, which implies that

the seeker is also akin to the Deity. Great emphasis is placed on devotional and ethical practices, which purify the soul of the impurities of egoism, passions, and destructive emotions. The devotee then rises to the *mahēśa-sthala*, where he is in a joyful mood and is intent on serving others. This stage lays stress on firmness, courage, and staunch adherence to the Vīraśaiva dogmas. Observance of vows (*vrata*), regulations (*niyama*), and moral precepts (*śīla*); pure devotion, and freedom from desires enhance the purity of the soul. The devotee thus ascends to the *prasādi-sthala*, where the favour or grace (*prasāda*) of Shiva is bestowed upon him. He is now a *prasādin* and looks upon all objects as Shiva's *prasāda*. *Kriyā* in the form of worship and *jñāna* are blended together from the beginning to the end. However, in the first three stages, worship gets an upper hand, and the distinction between the Deity and the devotee is maintained. In the next three stages, jnana predominates, and the distinction between Deity and devotee gradually decreases. In its place, the idea of the identity of the soul with the Deity emerges and becomes brighter. Through meditation, the devotee ascends to the *prāṇalīngi-sthala*, where he realizes the Atman, the internal illuminating light of Consciousness (*prāṇa* means Atman here, and not vital force). The soul feels sure of its identity with the Deity, but due to the residual impressions of duality the identity is not complete. In the next stage, *śaraṇa-sthala*, there is complete self-surrender to Shiva. The soul is in communion with the Deity, but duality still exists, though markedly attenuated. In the final stage, *aikya-sthala*, there is complete unity, and the soul ceases to exist as distinct from the Deity.

Vīraśaiva saints say that this final attainment is beyond what can be humanly ex-



Sri Basaveshvara

RAMAKRISHNA MATH, HYDERABAD

pressed. It is only to be felt and experienced. The saint Renukacharya said, 'Like water poured in water, fire placed in fire, the soul that becomes mingled in the Supreme Shiva is not seen as distinct.'

### **Pāśupata Śaivism**

The Pāśupatas (from *Paśupati*, meaning Shiva, 'the Lord of souls') are the oldest known sect of Śaivite ascetic monks. Their most famous places of worship are the Somnāth Temple in Gujarat and the Paśupatināth Temple in Nepal. Pāśupatism is primarily an ascetic path that rejects dialectical logic and prizes sadhana as a means to actuate Lord Shiva's compassionate grace (*karuṇā*), which is essential for liberation or dissociation from all sorrow.

Pāśupata monks follow a brave, ego-stripping path meant to infuse the seeker with Lord Shiva's compassion. They wander about, pounding the dust with iron tridents and stout staffs, their oily hair snarled in unkempt coils or tied in a knot, and their loins wrapped in deerskin or coarse cloth. Their faces wrinkle with intense devotion and their piercing eyes see more Shiva than the world—which is permeated by Shiva. The holy ashes which besmear the body are indicators of the monk being a Pāśupata ascetic. Their chief mantra is *Om Namaḥ Śivāya*. Their awe-inspiring austerity and worship of Shiva is steeped in a profound awareness of the cosmos as Shiva's constant becoming, and is accompanied by an almost frolicsome spirit of devotion towards him.

In the beginning of their sadhana, the Pāśupatas practise special disciplines such as japa, Shiva-intoxicated laughter, singing, and dancing. These are accompanied with strict codes of ethics, called *yama* and *niyama*, stressing continence (brahmacharya), non-injury (ahimsa), non-irritability (*akrodha*), and asceticism (tapas). The next stage of sadhana is the performance of the *pāśupata-vrata*, which is a means of self-purification, of rooting out egoism, which is the fetter (*pāśa*) that estranges the soul (*paśu*) from its Lord (*Paśupati*). Pāśupatas believe that when a person is established in the path of asceticism, he is able to accept with equanimity all

abuse and insult. Accordingly, the ascetics disperse into mainstream society and live incognito. There they purposely invite public censure by perpetrating outrageous acts such as making snorting sounds, babbling, walking as if crippled, gesturing wildly, and talking nonsense. Such behaviour is meant not only to bestow fortitude but also to enliven the ascetic's disinclination towards all worldly fame and honour. Thus they attempt to fully establish in their subconscious the knowledge that like and dislike, good and bad, and all such human ways of thinking and feeling are not different from one another if one's love for Lord Shiva is sufficiently strong.

In the final stage, the seeker practises the Pāśupata-yoga, which enjoins the yogi to stay in a cemetery in order to intensify his renunciation without being subject to the attractions of the world; to have an ash-bath three times a day, to imitate the form of Shiva, and to dance, being intoxicated with devotion to him. He practises meditation by withdrawing his mind from all objects—past, present and future—and devotedly concentrating it on Shiva. While meditating on Shiva, the aspirant should also meditate upon the Shakti of Shiva, as the whole world is pervaded by both of them. The 'Vayaviya Samhita' in the *Shiva-mahapurana* (7.2.38) describes the Pāśupata-yoga as follows: The yogi is advised to sit still like a piece of stone and fix his attention on the tip of the nose. He should think of and meditate on Shiva and Shakti within himself, as if they were installed in the seat of the heart. Meditation should at first commence with an object; later on it becomes objectless. Pāśupatas believe that since Shiva is formless (*niṣkala*), and unassociated with anything that can be expressed by speech (*vāg-viśuddha*), his formless nature should alone be meditated upon. Continuous meditation culminates in *sāyujya*, which means being in perpetual contact with Shiva. Liberation in Pāśupatism means *duḥkḥānta*, to be eternally disassociated from all sorrows.

### **Trika or Advaita School of Kashmir Śaivism**

According to Trika, Parama-Shiva, the Ultimate



Kailas, the mountain home of Bhagavan Shiva

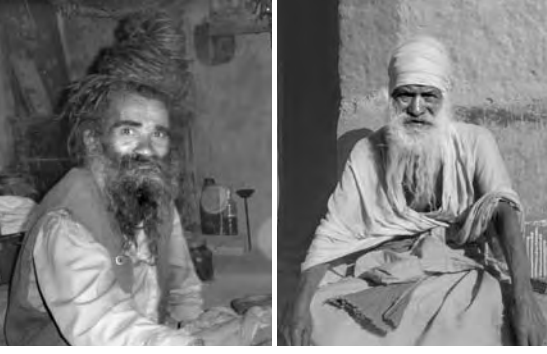
Reality, is not only universal Consciousness but also supreme spiritual Energy or Power. Its nature is described as *prakāśa-vimarśamaya*. *Prakāśa* is the eternal light of Consciousness. It is Shiva. *Vimarśa* is Shiva's *karṭṛtva śakti* (power of action). She is, so to speak, the mirror in which Shiva realizes his own grandeur, power, and beauty. Shiva and his Shakti are non-different, just like fire and its burning power. The first two sutras of the *Pratyabhijñāhridayam* state that *citi-śakti* or Shiva's ever-free creative power, of her own free-will, is the cause of the projection of the universe (*Citiḥ svatantra viśvasiddhi-hetuḥ*). By the power of her own will, she unfolds the universe upon her screen, that is, in herself, the basis of the universe (*Svecchayā svabhītau viśvam-unmīlayati*).

Shiva veils or limits his true nature and powers by the maya of his Shakti and thus becomes bound as an empirical being or jiva. Maya has five coverings (*kañcukas*), which bring about this limitation of the universal Consciousness as follows: (i) *kalā* reduces universal authorship (*sarvakarṭṛtva*) to limited efficacy; (ii) *vidyā* reduces omniscience (*sarvajñatva*) to limited knowledge; (iii) *rāga* reduces 'all-satisfaction' (*pūrṇatva*) and brings about desires for this and that; (iv) *kāla* reduces eternity (*nityatva*) to divisions in time—past, present, and future; and (v) *niyati* reduces freedom and pervasiveness (*svatantratā* and *vyāpakatva*) and brings

about limitation in respect of cause and space. Thus Shiva forgets his universal divine nature and becomes jiva. In the course of this descent, the universal Consciousness-Power (*citi-śakti*) reduces herself into individual consciousness or *citta*.

The Trika philosophy recognizes that while Shakti is the cause of bondage, she is also the cause of and means to liberation. Sri Ramakrishna describes these two aspects of maya as *avidyā-māyā* and *vidyā-māyā*. He says further: 'One must propitiate the Divine Mother, the Primal Energy, in order to obtain God's grace. God Himself is Mahāmāyā, who deludes the world with Her illusion and conjures up the magic of creation, preservation, and destruction. She has spread this veil of ignorance before our eyes. We can go into the inner chamber only when She lets us pass through the door. Living outside, we see only outer objects, but not that Eternal Being, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute.' The *Vijñanabhairava* also describes this Shakti as the doorway for entry into Shiva (*Śaivī mukham iha ucyate*).

Liberation in Trika means recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of one's true divine nature as Shiva (*mokṣo hi nāma naivānyaḥ svarūpa-prathanam hi tat*.) Sri Ramakrishna says much the same when he states that 'man freed from bondage is Śiva; entangled in bondage, he is jiva.' Liberation from bondage comes by *śaktipāta*—the descent of divine Shak-



Shiva is the ideal of ascetics

ti—or *anugraha*, divine grace. By means of spiritual practices (*sadhana*) the individual consciousness (*citta*) is purified and transformed into its original state of pure Consciousness, *cit*. To receive this grace the aspirant has to undergo spiritual disciplines, which have been divided under four broad heads as means of approach (*upāyas*): *āṇavopāya*, *śāktopāya*, *śāmbhavopāya*, and *anupāya*. These means of approach are to be adopted according to one's progress up the spiritual ladder and are explained in detail in the *Shiva-Sutras*. They are briefly described here:

1. In *āṇavopāya* the limited conditioned individual (*anu*) takes up some limited aspect such as *buddhi* (intellect), *prāṇa* (vital force), body, or some external object as support for the start of yogic practice. It is also called *kriyopāya*, since activities such as meditation (*dhyana*), repetition of the mantra (*japa*), worship of a chosen deity (*puja*), techniques of fixing attention on the various aspects of *prāṇa*—*prāṇa*, *apāna*, *samāna*, and the like—(*prāṇa-dhāraṇā*) are predominant. The *Pātāñjala-yoga* corresponds to some aspects of *āṇavopāya*.

2. In *śāktopāya*, the aspirant resorts to the *citi-śakti* or *vimarśa-śakti* (the divine I-consciousness) for realization. It is also known as *mantropāya* or *jñānopāya*, and is prescribed for aspirants whose mind (*citta*) is already spiritually oriented. It is a process of self-inquiry in which the *citta* is used for seeking the source of its being, the significance of the mantra, and the supreme I-consciousness which is itself the source of all mantras. The ordinary mind is full of *asuddha vikalpas*, impure or er-

roneous beliefs and ideas based on duality, which obstruct one's true divine nature. *Śāktopāya* is the practice of *suddha vikalpa* to nullify the sense of duality. *Suddha vikalpa* is the idea and belief that 'I am that unlimited Consciousness transcending all limited expressions of Reality. I alone am that highest Reality which is both transcendent to and immanent in the universe.' It means pondering over that full, divine I-consciousness, which is the creative Shakti of the Supreme, as our true nature. The first sutra of *śāktopāya* in *Shiva-Sutras* states: *cittam mantrah*. *Citta* in this context is that which earnestly seeks to apprehend the highest Reality (*cetyate vimṛśyate anena parama-tattvam iti cittam*). The mantra enshrines within itself the highest Reality, and awakens that mental awareness by which one feels one's identity with this Reality. One thus saves oneself from the sense of separateness and difference characteristic of the world with the help of the mantra (*mananāt trāyate iti mantra*). Mantras consist of letters which are symbols of the creative shaktis of the Divine. The Parā-Śakti or Parā-Vāk or I-consciousness of the Supreme is the soul of all mantras. By constantly dwelling upon the significance of the real 'I' enshrined in the mantra, the *citta* ultimately becomes sanctified and transformed by the power of the mantra, and the aspirant attains *prātibha jñāna* or intuitive realization of the real divine Self. In Trika this Self-realization is termed *ātma-vyāpti* (Self-awareness). The highest attainment, however, is called *Śiva-vyāpti* or Shiva-consciousness, in which the entire universe appears as I or Shiva. The *jñāna-yoga* of Vedānta corresponds somewhat to *śāktopāya*.

3. *Śāmbhavopāya* is a special feature of the Śaiva tradition. It is meant for advanced aspirants who, by meditation on *śivatattva* (the Shiva principle), attain to his consciousness. It is the path of 'constant awareness'. One starts with the practice of the consciousness that the universe is only a reflection of *cit*, but later on even this has to be given up. *Malinivijaya* describes Śāmbhava-yoga in the following way: 'When there is identification with Shiva without any mentation or thought-process, but

merely by an intensive orientation of will-power (*icchā-śakti*) towards the inner Reality, then there is Śāmbhava-yoga.' When we neither accept, nor reject, when there is simple awareness freed from all ideation, then there is a sudden, spontaneous flash of experience of our essential Self. This is direct, immediate realization. Some contemplation techniques described in the *Ashtavakra Samhita*, the 'wu-wei' (non-interference) of Taoism, and the 'let-go' of Zen correspond to *śāmbhavopāya*.

4. *Anupāya* can hardly be called an *upāya*. There are very advanced souls who receive intense grace (*tīvra śaktipāta*). This *anugraha* or grace may come through just a word of the guru, or may be showered on them directly, and they experience Self-realization instantly. They are liberated without much spiritual practice.

The *Pratyabhijnahridayam* propounds that Shiva is ever engaged in the fivefold act (*pañca-kṛtyas*) of (i) emanation (*śṛṣṭi*), (ii) maintenance (*sthiti*), (iii) re-absorption (*saṁbhāra*), (iv) concealment (*vilaya*), and (v) grace (*anugraha*). This fivefold act of Shiva continues even when he plays the role of an empirical self in bondage (*Tathāpi tadvat pañcakṛtyāni karoti*). To be a bound soul (*saṁsārin*) is to be ignorant of one's authorship of the fivefold act due to delusion by one's own shaktis. Thus the *Pratyabhijnahridayam* lays the greatest stress on the contemplation of the *pañca-kṛtyas* that are going on constantly in the jiva. In order to rise to higher consciousness, the aspirant must constantly dwell on the esoteric meaning of the fivefold act as follows: The mental perception of the individual with reference to a particular place and time is *śṛṣṭi* within. The retention and enjoyment of what one perceives is *sthiti* or preservation. At the time of the delight of I-consciousness, the object is absorbed in consciousness. This is *saṁbhāra*. When, even after the object is withdrawn, its impression is about to rise in one's consciousness again, that corresponds to *vilaya* (concealment of the real nature of the Self). When objective experience is completely absorbed into *cit* or the true Self, it is *anugraha*. By the constant practice of the awareness of

this fivefold act and acquiring full knowledge of it, the *citta* (individual consciousness) by inward movement becomes *citi* (universal consciousness) by rising to the status of *cetana* (consciousness of the Self)—*Tat pariñāne cittameva antarmukhī-bhāvena cetanapadādhyārohāt citiḥ*.

The *Vijnanabhairava* contains over a hundred *dhāraṇās* or contemplative practices, mainly for advanced aspirants. Interestingly, the spiritual experiences and frequent samadhis of Sri Ramakrishna, whose mind dwelt in *bhāvamukha*—the borderline between the Absolute and the relative—throw wonderful light on many of these *dhāraṇās*. However, detailed discussions on these advanced esoteric practices are beyond the scope of this article.

### Śaiva Siddhānta

Śaiva Siddhānta is a dualistic religion which is based on redemption through devotion and the grace (*arul*) of God. Through the experience of suffering and bondage in the world, a soul feels the necessity to come in contact with a higher power which can give it peace and solace. This is the stage when the soul is ripe for release from bondage (*mala-paripāka*), which qualifies it for the decent of divine grace (*śaktinipāta*). The soul awakens to the sense of divine Reality, Power, Glory, Beauty, and Grace, and begins to consciously struggle towards God, Shiva, by gradually renouncing its entanglement with the world and engaging itself in spiritual discipline. According to the intensity of the *śaktinipāta*, the religious life of the devotee is divided into four stages: *caryā*, *kriyā*, *yoga*, and *jñāna*, each with specific physical and mental activities prescribed for cultivation of devotion.


*Caryā* and *kriyā* are the beginner's stages of purification of the mind. *Caryā*, which is fully external, includes worship of God with the aid of temples and images, and service to God's devotees as well as to all beings. It includes easy duties such as lighting lamps, plucking flowers, sweeping and washing the temple, praising God, cooking food offerings, and assisting in his worship. *Kriyā* is both external and internal in form and method. It comprises perform-

ing puja, reading and learning the scriptures, reciting prayers, japa, meditation, austerities, truthfulness, purity, love, and offering food. *Yoga* is a purely psychological process of purifying the mind and body through the control of the organs of action and knowledge, through pranayama, and through contemplation and meditation on God and his infinite attributes. When the devotee is well established in the above three stages, God appears in the form of a guru to direct and guide him or her into the mysteries of *jñāna sādhanā* (or *sanmārga*, the way of truth), through which the devotee endeavours to attain final union with Shiva.

The practice of *jñāna sādhanā* is divided into three stages, which are again subdivided into ten states called *daśakārya*. The first stage consists of *tattva-rūpa*, *tattva-darśana*, and *tattva-suddhi*. Through these the devotee attains a true knowledge of the *tattvas* (categories of nature) and realizes that they are products of *maya*, which is material, insentient, and impure. This knowledge confers the strength to cut asunder the binding influence of *maya*. The second stage consists of *ātma-rūpa*, *ātma-darśana*, and *ātma-suddhi*, through which the soul disengages itself from the control of the *tattvas*, realizes itself as pure and free intelligence, and identifies itself with the divine grace of God (*arul-śakti*). The third stage consists of the states of *śiva-rūpa*, *śiva-darśana*, *śiva-yoga*, and *śiva-bhoga*. In *śiva-rūpa*, the devotee attains the knowledge that the omnipresent Supreme Shiva, with the help of *Parā-Śakti*, is engaged in the five acts of creation, preservation, concealment, destruction, and bestowal of grace. In *śiva-darśana*, the purified soul, freed from I-ness and my-ness, sees Shiva in everybody and everywhere and enjoys supreme bliss. The state of union in which the soul completely identifies itself with Shiva and sees that all activities and actions, both individual and of the world, flow from Shiva, is *śiva-yoga*. *Śiva-bhoga* is the state of liberation called *jivanmukti*. The soul is finally cleansed of all its impurities and dwells in Shiva, and Shiva dwells in it. It enjoys the supreme Bliss (*śivānanda*) which is beyond any subject-object relationship. In

the Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy of liberation, the individuality of the soul is not annihilated, but the soul completely identifies itself with Shiva and appears as One. The Śaiva saint Arunagirinathar sings: 'That which neither goes nor comes, which knows neither night nor day, which is neither without nor within, which is speechless and formless and without end, assails me ceaselessly and makes me Itself, conferring tranquillity of mind. The blissful state is beyond expression, O Lord of six aspects!'

### In Conclusion

The various forms and practices of Śaivism have endowed it with the necessary vitality to survive and develop through the many centuries. It continues to be the vibrant and living faith of millions of people. Devotees of Lord Shiva range from those who hold on to Shiva with their simple faith and daily devotions, to earnest seekers of the highest Reality, who pursue the highly systematic doctrines and yogic practices of various branches of Śaivism. This article has attempted to cover, in a broad way, some aspects of the vast expanse of Śaivism being practised by people living in society, as in Viraśaivism and Śaiva Siddhānta; by ascetic monks, as in Pāśupata Śaivism; and by aspirants who incorporate the highest philosophical ideas into their practice of well-defined yogic methods, as in the Advaita school of Kashmir Śaivism. 

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*The cry is loud, the cry is long,  
The cry of creeds, 'Yea, this is He!'  
The cry comes back, the cry as strong,  
The cry of creeds, 'Nay, this is He!'  
Thus cry all creeds, all creeds are wrong,  
Which cry, 'Yea this, nay that, is He!'  
The truth indeed all creeds proclaim  
That God in very sooth is He  
Who evermore remains the same,  
Not this, not that, but One is He,  
Held in the heart's own holy shrine,  
Homed in the soul, the Guest Divine.*

—Pattinathar

# The Jain Contemplative Tradition

Acharya Mahaprajna

**P**ARINAMANA, transformation or change, is of two types: (i) *sādi*, which has a beginning (and an end), and (ii) *anādi*, which has no beginning (or end). Both historic and pre-historic time has to do with *sādi parinamana*. The wheel of time is in constant motion, bringing about this change.

*Bhārata-kṣetra* (the land of Bharata) was originally a place for enjoyment or *bhoga*; Arhat Ṛṣabha transformed it into a land of karma through the sword, the pen, and the plough (*asi*, *masi*, and *kṛṣi*). This is mentioned in the Jain literature. The Jain tradition traces its origin to the concepts of Atman (*ātmavāda*) and moksha (*mokṣavāda*) as propounded by Ṛṣabha. According to Jainism, Ṛṣabha was the first proponent of *ātmavidyā*, knowledge of the Self. He was the first king, first Jina (or Arhat), first *kevalī* (liberated soul), first Tirthankara, and first *dharma-cakravartī* (establisher of dharma).<sup>1</sup>

The event of Ṛṣabha's becoming a Jina was so momentous that 'the first Jina' became one of his epithets.<sup>2</sup> This is reiterated in the Bhagavata: 'Vāsudeva's eighth incarnation was in (the home of) Marudevi and Nābhi, as Ṛṣabha, who showed the path respected by people in every stage of life.'<sup>3</sup> This is the reason why Ṛṣabha is referred to as 'part of Vāsudeva' in discourses on moksha.<sup>4</sup>

Ṛṣabha had a hundred sons. All of them were proficient in *brahmavidyā* (the knowledge of the Vedas) (*ibid.*). Nine of them have been referred to as

'adepts in the knowledge of the Atman'.<sup>5</sup> His eldest son Bharata was a great yogi.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Jambudvīpa Prajñapti*, the *Kalpasūtra*, and the Bhagavata we find Ṛṣabha referred to as the first person proficient in *ātmavidyā*, the knowledge of Atman. It is small wonder then that it is Ṛṣabha who has been referred to in the Upanishads as Brahṁā. Hiranyagarbha is another epithet of Brahṁā. According to the Mahabharata, the primal master of yoga is none other than Hiranyagarbha.<sup>7</sup> And the Bhagavata terms Ṛṣabha *yogeśvara*, the master of yoga.<sup>8</sup> He practised many yogic disciplines.<sup>9</sup> In the *Hathayoga Pradīpikā*, Ṛṣabha is saluted as the instructor of hatha yoga.<sup>10</sup> The Jain acharyas too hold him as the progenitor of yoga.<sup>11</sup> It is from this viewpoint that Bhagavan Ṛṣabha is called Ādinātha, Hiranyagarbha, or Brahṁā.

The Śramaṇa tradition owes its origin to Arhat Ṛṣabha. It is based on three principles: (i) *sama*—equanimity; (ii) *śama*—restraint or peace; and (iii) *śrama*—self effort. The Arhat Dharma is the original form of the Jain Dharma. The epithet 'Arhat' is applied to the twenty-three Tirthankaras from Ṛṣabha to Pārśva.<sup>12</sup> But Mahavira is referred to as Śramaṇa Bhagavān Mahāvira. The term *Jain Dharma* was not in vogue during Mahavira's time. In Buddhist literature, Mahavira is referred to as *niggantha nāyaputta*. In the Jain Āgamas the term *nirgrantha* is used in place of *Arhat Dharma*.<sup>13</sup> It was two centuries after the nirvana



Bhagavan Mahavira



of Bhagavan Mahavira that the term *Jain* came in vogue (1.6.7).

To put it in more definitive terms, the prehistoric phase of Jainism is the 'period of Arhats.' Arhat Pārśva is considered a historic figure, though he belongs to the Arhat period. Bhagavan Mahavira introduced some changes in the Arhat Dharma. Consequently, Arhat Dharma became popular as Nirgrantha Dharma or Jain Dharma.

Some scholars consider Mahavira the founder of Jainism. This is only partially true. When viewed from the standpoint of the entire tradition, Mahavira is not the founder, but from the temporal or relative standpoint he may be termed as founder. There were twenty-three Tirthankaras after Arhat Rṣabha. Mahavira was the last in this line.

Ariṣṭanemi was the twenty-second Tirthankara. He was a cousin of Sri Krishna. He laid special emphasis on ahimsa. Ariṣṭanemi's marriage was fixed with Rājimati, the daughter of Ugrasena, a Bhoja king. When the wedding party reached the marriage site, Ariṣṭanemi heard some distraught voices. 'What are these voices?' he asked his elephant-driver. 'Lord, these are animal sounds,' the latter replied. 'These animals will provide the food for the guests at your wedding. They are screaming for fear of death.' 'What sort of enjoyment is this, involving the death of thousands of poor speechless creatures!' said Ariṣṭanemi. 'What is the use of a marriage that is the cause for transmigration in *samsara*?' He had his elephant turn back homeward.

This incident reminds us that the tradition of



*Bahubali, Rishabha's son, renounced the sovereignty of a mighty kingdom and performed severe austerities before he was taught by his sister the ultimate lesson: 'To dismount the Elephant of Pride.'*

*ātmavidyā* that started with Arhat Rṣabha remained uninterrupted. Ahimsa or *karuṇā* (compassion) was but one component of this tradition.

Arhat Pārśva was the twenty-third Tirthankara. He provided able leadership to the Śramaṇa tradition and was responsible for its spread. The Upanishads were compiled after his time. Arhat Pārśva lived in the tenth century BCE, while scholars date the Upanishads between 900 and 300 BCE.<sup>14</sup>

There is no denying the fact that the concepts of Atman, karma, transmigration, *sannyasa*, and *moksha* were subjects of philosophical discussion during Arhat Pārśva's time. These discussions have been delineated

in the *Chhandogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, and other Upanishads. The tradition initiated by Arhat Rṣabha was being carried forward by Kshatriyas. *Ātmavidyā* too was being cultivated by Kshatriyas. This is evident on studying the Upanishads.<sup>15</sup> It can be easily seen that the Arhats, *bhikṣus*, and *parivrajakas* of the Śramaṇa tradition had an important role in the development of Upanishadic thought.

The *Isibhasiyam* is a well known text of the Jain tradition. It is a compilation of the teachings and experiences of forty-five Arhats. Not all of them belong to the tradition of Pārśva and Mahavira. It includes the thoughts of Vedic rishis like Nārada, Asita, and Devala. Bhagavan Mahavira's family followed the tradition of Arhat Pārśva. So did Bhagavan Buddha's family.

Bhagavan Mahavira propounded the concept of *jāti* (caste) based on karma or actions, rather than

on birth. He protested against the killings involved in sacrifice and ignored the ideas of creation of the world by God. These are being presented as being revolutionary thoughts on the part of Bhagavan Mahavira, and it is being freely mentioned by scholars that Bhagavan Mahavira started the Jain Dharma to protest the institution of caste and sacrificial killings. But there is very little truth in such statements.

Mahavira did add a few tenets and mantras to the Śramaṇa or Arhat tradition, and carried forward this tradition; but he did not initiate a new tradition. The ideas of 'destiny' of the Ajivakas and 'fate' of the Vedic tradition were making the popular mind averse to self-effort; Mahavira injected life into the tradition of self-effort. The lopsided emphasis on the doctrine of karma was generating mental constraints; Mahavira's liberal view transformed this inhibition into enthusiasm [for work]. It was revolutionary on his part to say that even past actions can be changed by proper self-effort.

Mahavira was asked, 'Bhante! Who is responsible for sorrow? Is it oneself, or someone else, or are both oneself and others responsible for it?' Mahavira replied, 'Sorrow is created by oneself, not by someone else or by a combination of oneself and others.'

Mahavira downplayed the idea of heaven and emphasized nirvana instead. It is for this reason that he is called 'the best among the proponents of nirvana.'<sup>16</sup> His exposition of the duties of the householder, based on the concept of nirvana, is of relevance even today. Ahimsa and *aparigraha*, non-possessiveness, are two ideas particularly worthy of serious consideration.

The *grhastha* or householder is a social being. Non-possession cannot be enjoined for him or her. So Bhagavan Mahavira advised limitation of desires or limitation of possessions. This in turn is governed by two principles: (i) purification of the means of earning, not earning wealth through unethical means; and (ii) limitation of enjoyment.

Possessiveness is the biggest cause of violence. This issue has been dealt with in great detail [in

Jainism]. For efficient management of environmental and social resources, the concepts of regulation and limitation are very important.

The *grhastha* cannot undertake ahimsa as a *mahāvratā*, supreme vow. A practical way has been suggested for him. *Himsā* or violence is of two types: (i) *artha himsā* [caused by activities of daily living]; and (ii) *anartha himsā* [caused by passions and evil motives]. Farming, business, and such other means of livelihood cannot be forsaken by the householder. But aggression, stealing, cruelty, and violence caused by unethical acts must be abjured.

Bhagavan Mahavira fostered the tradition of self-restraint (*saṁyama*) and vows (*vratā*). The tradition has had its ups and downs. But it can be asserted that vows and restraint are valued even today in the Jain tradition. It won't be an exaggeration to say that the life of poverty and ahimsa exemplified by Jain sadhus is revered even today by the masses. Jain *śrāvakas* (initiates) have generally been more conscientious in business matters. The acharyas of both the Shvetambara and Digambara traditions have produced a huge mass of literature on the duties of *śrāvakas*. This has influenced the Jain *śrāvakas* till today. Acharya Tulasi has introduced a *vratā dīkṣā* (initiation into vows) that is of value to the masses. The nine categories of fundamental truths [*jīva*, *ajīva*, *āśrava*, *saṁvara*, and the like] of Jain living are of great importance in solving the psycho-spiritual problems of the present age.

The Vedic tradition paid great attention to the practices and injunctions guiding social life. Consequently, social life kept developing. The Jain acharyas paid more attention to spiritual growth. So the spiritual process of life kept developing. Acharyas like Siddhasena, Samantabhadra, Haribhadra Sūri, Akalaṅka, and Hemachandra widely propagated the doctrine of *anekānta*, non-exclusiveness. *Anekānta*, *syādvāda* [conditional nature of judgement] and *nayavāda* [multiplicity of viewpoints] were widely discussed philosophical issues. These are of great help in exploring the subtleties of the scientific world too.

Acharya Bhikṣu has provided a minute analysis

of the unity of the means and the ends and has laid great emphasis on purification of the means. He has re-established the non-sectarian Dharma that was the original philosophy of Mahavira.

Acharya Tulsi launched the Anuvrat Movement and made it vibrant. He announced that Dharma has primacy over sectarianism. It is due to this non-sectarian viewpoint that the concepts and practices of *prekṣā dhyān* [contemplative reflection] for spiritual growth, of *jīvan vijñān* [life-sciences] for balanced education, and *anuvrat* [lay vows] for ethical living and character development are proving to be of use to all.

**The fruit of Preksha Meditation** is the recognition of the voice of the spirit. The voice of the mind is not the voice of the spirit. To confuse the one with the other is an illusion. The voice of equanimity and dispassion alone is the voice of the spirit.

—Acharya Mahaprajna

Ahimsa involves the development of a specific mental orientation. This is not achieved by mere reading or listening to discourses. What is needed is a transformation of consciousness. This requires prolonged practice.

We started spiritual and scientific work under Acharya Tulsi. This work has helped successfully address contemporary problems to a great extent. Special emphasis is being given to three tenets of Jain thought: (i) *ahimsā*; (ii) *aparigraha*; and (iii) *anekānta*. The non-exclusive or non-dogmatic approach called *anekānta* can provide solutions to many problems of the present yuga. This idea is regaining ground. But in this regard we emphasize Acharya Tulsi's unambiguous opinion that the problem of *parigraha*, possessiveness or having possessions in excess of one's needs, must be addressed first. For this, '*aparigrahaḥ paramo dharmah*; non-possessiveness is the supreme dharma' must be given primacy over the age old dictum '*ahimsā paramo dharmah*; ahimsa is the supreme dharma'. The economic thought of Mahavira is the first step in this direction.

I conclude this discussion of the development of Jain thought with the following reflection: Today, religious thinkers need to be economic thinkers, and economists, religious thinkers. Only then can we conceive of healthy individuals, a healthy society, and a healthy economic system.



*This article has been translated from the original Hindi version provided by Acharya Mahaprajnaji.*

## Notes and References

1. *Usahe nāma arahā kosaliye paḍhamarāyā paḍhamajñe paḍhamakevali paḍhamatitthakare paḍhama-dhamma-vara-cakkavattī samuppajjitthe* (*Jambudvīpa Prajñapti*, 2.30).
2. *Usabheṇaṁ kosaliye kāsavagutte naṁ, tassa naṁ paṁca nāmadhijjā evamāhijjānti, taṁ jahā-usabhe i vā paḍhamarāyā i vā paḍhamabhikkhācare i vā paḍhamajñe i vā paḍhamatitthakare i vā* (*Kalpa-sutra*, 194).
3. *Aṣṭame merudevyāṁ tu nābherjāta urukramah, darśayan vartmadhīrāṇāṁ sarvāśramanamaskṛtam* (*Bhagavata*, 1.3.13).
4. *Tamāhur-vāsudevāṁśaṁ mokṣadharmavivakṣayā, avatīrṇaṁ sutaśataṁ tasyāsīd brahmapāragam* (11.2.16).
5. *Navābhavan mahābhāgā munayo hyarthaśaṁsinaḥ, śramaṇā vātaraśanā ātmavidyāvīśaradāḥ* (11.2.20).
6. *Yeṣāṁ khalu mahāyogī bharato jyeṣṭhaḥ śreṣṭhaguṇa āsīt* (5.4.9).
7. *Hiraṇyagarbho yogasya vettā nānyaḥ purātanaḥ* (*Mahabharata*, 'Shanti Parva', 344.60).
8. *Bhagavān-ṛṣabhadevo yogeśvaraḥ* (*Bhagavata*, 5.4.3).
9. *Nānāyogacaryācaraṇo bhagavān kaivalyapatir-ṛṣabhah* (5.5.35).
10. *Śrī ādināthāya namo'stu tasmai yenopadiṣṭā haṭhayoga-vidyā* (*Hathayoga Pradipika*, 1.1).
11. *Yogikalpataruṁ naumi devadevaṁ vṛṣadhvajam* (*Jnanarnava*, 1.2).
12. *Jambuddivapannatti*, 'Vakkharo', 2.65; *Pajjosavana Kappo*, 160–181.
13. *Suyagado*, 2.7.18–19.
14. A B Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 20; F Max Müller, *The Upanishads* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879) lxvi; H C Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927), 1–33.
15. *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.11, 6.2.8.
16. *Nivvāṇavādiṇiha nāyaputte* (*Suyagado*, 1.6.21).

# Contemplating the Theravada Tradition

Ajahn Amaro

A COUPLE of days ago a few people asked: ‘What is Theravada Buddhism?’ It’s a good question. Oftentimes people have come across *vipassana*, insight meditation, and its related teachings, disconnected from their origins. Sometimes they are not even aware that *vipassana* has anything to do with Buddhism, or who the Buddha was.

### How It Began

As far as the histories go, it seems that, in its initial form, the Theravada school began about 100 years after the Buddha’s time. A few months after the Parinibbana, a great council of elders was held to formalize and establish the Teachings. A hundred years later they had a second council, again to go over all the Teachings (the discourses and the monastic rules), in the attempt to keep everyone on the same page. However, as it transpired, it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. The way I understand it—and there are different versions of this—the larger portion of the Community wanted to change some of the rules, including allowing the monastics to use money.

The majority of the Sangha wanted to bring in these reforms, but there was a small group that said, ‘Well, whether it makes sense or not, we want to do things the way the Buddha and his original disciples did.’ Those

of the small group were known as the *Sthaviras* (in Sanskrit) or *Theras* (in Pali), meaning ‘Elders’. After about another 130 years, they gave rise to the Theravadan school. *Theravada* literally means ‘The Way of the Elders’, and that has been their abiding theme ever since. The ethos of the tradition can be characterized as something like: ‘Right or wrong, that’s the way the Buddha established it, so that’s the way we’ll do it.’ It has thus always had a particularly conservative quality to it. This is a very abbreviated version of the story, but it essentially describes the pattern of our origins.

As with all religious traditions and human institutions, over time a number of branches grew up. It is said that by about 250 years after the Buddha’s time, during the reign of the Emperor Ashoka, there were eighteen different major schools of the *Buddha-sasana*, the Buddha’s dispensation. It is

important to note, however, that these were not completely separate sects. Regularly there were monasteries where people of many different schools lived with each other—apparently this was more common than not. It was normal to have schools and teachers from different strands working together and living side by side. There were different emphases, but there was considerable harmony within the Sangha also. The Theravada branch (*Sthaviravada* in Sanskrit) was just one of those schools.



### **The Patronage of Emperor Ashoka**

One of the reasons why the Theravada tradition has been sustained pretty much in its original form ever since then is because of the Emperor Ashoka. That was the school that Ashoka espoused, and since he was by then in charge of India, he decided India would become a Buddhist nation. Primarily he patronized the Theravada tradition, although he also gave support to other Buddhist lineages as well as to various non-Buddhist sects. Later his son and daughter, Mahinda and Sanghamitta, went to Sri Lanka—Sanghamitta was a *bhikkhuni*, a Buddhist nun, and Mahinda was a monk. They took the Theravada tradition to Sri Lanka and established it there in about 240 BCE.

### **The Language of the Theravada Teachings**

Pali is the language of the Theravada scriptures. It seems to have been something of a lingua franca in the region of the Ganges valley around the time of the Buddha, closely related therefore to the language that the Buddha actually spoke. The Buddha was adamant that the Teachings should be learned in this common speech and passed on by rote learning, rather than being cast into the ‘religious language’ of Sanskrit, let alone written down, thereby becoming the sole property of the Brahmins, who were the only ones who could speak it.

Pali is something of a poor cousin to Sanskrit, having a much simpler grammar, and does not have its own alphabet. It was not written down at all until 73 BCE, in Sri Lanka, when there was a famine and concern that, if the monks and nuns who had memorized the Teachings died, the words of the Buddha would be lost forever. From that time on it has been written down, simply using the alphabet of each country it has come to, or in some cases, using an alphabet specially created for it.

Even though the Pali scriptures have long been committed to writing, they still keep much of their repetitive form—a form useful for rote learning and recital, but sometimes wearying for the silent reader. The Canon itself is divided into three major sections: the discourses of the Buddha

(*Sutta*), the monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), and the philosophical/psychological compendium of the *Abhidhamma*.

The scriptures of the Northern School (usually known as the *Mahayana* tradition) were largely written down in Sanskrit. Although they contain a portion of the Buddha’s Teachings as they are found in the Pali texts (these are known as the *Agamas*), the majority of their discourses have no exact counterparts in the Pali. Having said this, however, even features that at first glance might seem unique to the Northern lineages, such as the Pure Land, clearly have their roots in the texts and myths of the Southern. Whether these discourses were actually spoken by the Buddha and not included in the Pali collection for some reason, or whether they were composed at a later date, has been hotly debated by scholars and the faithful of both schools over many centuries. The majority of scholars agree, however, that the Pali is the most ancient and trustworthy redaction of the Buddha’s Teaching.

### **Degeneration and Renewal**

Throughout the time of the geographical dispersion of the Theravada tradition, the theme of a continual looking back to the original standards, the original Teachings, has been sustained. When being established in new countries, there has always been a strong sense of respectfulness and reverence for the original Teachings, and also a respect for the style of life as embodied by the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times. This is the model that was employed then and was thus carried on.

Obviously, in these many centuries, there have been lots of ups and downs, but this pattern is what has carried on. Sometimes the religion would die down in Sri Lanka, and then some monks would come from Burma to crank it up again. Then it would fade out in Thailand, and some Sri Lankans would boost them up—propping each other up over the centuries. Thus it has managed to keep itself afloat and is still largely in the original form.

When it would be well developed, it would get

rich, and then it would get overweight and corrupt, collapsing under its own weight. Then a splinter group would go off into the forest and say, 'Let's get back to basics!' and would again return to those original standards of keeping the monastic rules, practising meditation, and studying the original Teachings.

### **The Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths**

Although there are numerous volumes of the Buddha's discourses in many traditions, it is also said that the entirety of his Teaching was contained in his very first exposition—called 'The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth'—which he gave to five monastic companions in the deer park near Benares, shortly after his enlightenment. In this brief discourse (it takes only twenty minutes to recite), he expounded the nature of what he named the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.

This teaching, the Four Noble Truths, is common to all Buddhist traditions. Just as an acorn contains within it the template for what eventually takes shape as a vast and ancient oak, so too all the myriad Buddhist Teachings can be said to derive from this essential matrix of insight. What is more, enlightened Elders of both Southern and Northern traditions have agreed that this is the case.

The Four Noble Truths are formulated like a medical diagnosis in the Ayurvedic tradition: (i) the symptoms of the disease, (ii) the cause, (iii) the prognosis, and (iv) the cure. This, I am told, is the standard format. The Buddha was always drawing on structures and forms that were familiar to people in his time, and this is how he laid out the Four Noble Truths.

The First Truth (the 'symptom') is that there is *dukkha*—the experience of incompleteness, dissatisfaction, or frustration—that we are less than blissfully happy all the time. Does anybody argue with that? Occasionally we are blissfully happy, and everything is fine, but there are moments when we wobble. Why this is significant is that, if we have an intuition of an Ultimate Reality, an ultimate perfection, then how come there is this *dukkha*?

But there is.

Sometimes people read this First Truth and misinterpret it as an absolute statement: 'Reality in every dimension *is* *dukkha*'—that the universe and life and everything are unsatisfactory. The statement gets taken as an absolute value judgment of all and everything, but that's not what is meant here. These are *noble* truths, not *absolute* truths. They are 'noble' in the sense that they are relative truths that when understood lead us to a realization of the Absolute or the Ultimate. It's just saying, 'There is the experience of *dukkha*; there is the experience of dissatisfaction.'

The Second Truth is that the cause of this *dukkha* is self-centred craving, *tanha* in Pali (*trishna* in Sanskrit), which literally means 'thirst'. This craving, this grasping, is the cause of *dukkha*. This can be craving for sense-pleasure, craving to become something, craving to be, to be identified as something. Or it can be craving to not be, the desire to disappear, to be annihilated, to get rid of. There are many, many subtle dimensions of this.

The Third Truth is that of *dukkha-nirodha*. Nirodha means 'cessation'. This means that this experience of *dukkha*, of incompleteness, can fade away, can be transcended. It can end. In other words, *dukkha* is not an absolute reality. It's just a temporary experience that the heart can be liberated from.

The Fourth Truth is that of the Path, how we get from the Second Truth to the Third, from the experience of *dukkha* to ending it. The cure is the Eightfold Path, which is, in essence, virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

### **Dependent Origination—the Source Code**

With meditation, what we are looking at very closely is the bridge between the Second and Third Noble Truths: how suffering arises, what is the cause of suffering, and how we can bring about its cessation. The Buddha focused a huge amount of attention on explaining this point. He talked about the Four Noble Truths in many discourses and also went into a lot of fine analysis about the relationship be-

tween the Second and Third Truths.

He used the term *idapaccayata* for 'causality'. It literally means something like, 'the conditionality of the relationship between this and that'. This is talking about how things are brought into being—the chain of causation that brings dukkha into existence, and the chain of causation that brings it to cessation. There is a little passage that is repeated over and over in the suttas which I find very helpful to recollect:

When there is this, that comes to be.  
With the arising of this, that arises.  
When there is not this, that does not come to be.  
With the cessation of this, that ceases.<sup>1</sup>

This fundamental pattern underlies all the teachings on causality. In analysing the arising of dukkha—where *does* it come from?—the Buddha points to ignorance.

The Buddha, particularly in the Theravada Teachings, avoided any kind of metaphysical speculation. It's not as if: 'Well, there was this event at the beginning of the universe, and God blinked. Therefore we suffer.' The Buddha didn't go into any of that. He consciously avoided trying to describe any ultimate beginning of things; not because he didn't know how it all worked or because it was inherently wasteful to contemplate the nature of life, but largely because metaphysical speculation alone is pointless and unliberating. He used the telling simile of the poisoned arrow to illustrate this principle: A soldier has been wounded in battle. A field-surgeon comes along to help him, but the soldier says, 'I'll not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble, a brahmin, a merchant, or a worker ... the man's name and clan ... was he tall or short, fair or dark ... where he lived, what kind of bow he used, what wood the arrow was made from ... the bird the feathers came from, etc., etc.'

'All this would still remain unknown to that man and meanwhile he would die', said the Buddha.<sup>2</sup> The point of the tale is that the only wise and significant thing to do is to pull out the arrow and

treat the wound. In this light he simply said that the cause of the core wound is ignorance, not seeing clearly. Through not seeing clearly, the whole cycle begins: because there is less than total mindfulness, total awareness, total attunement to reality, we lose our balance.

This principle is known as Dependent Origination. In a way it is the nucleus of the entire Teaching, the source code for *Samsara* and *Nibbana* (*Nirvana* in Sanskrit). It is how the Buddha analysed the nature of experience in the most radical manner. Furthermore, the realization of Dependent Origination is what he pointed to as having been the way to his own enlightenment, and he prescribed its realization for others who were keen to cure their own disease of dukkha.

When there is ignorance, then the whole sense of 'subject' and 'object' crystallizes; the sense of this and that solidifies. There is an identification with the body and the senses as being 'self' and the external sense-objects as being 'the world outside'. Because there is a body, there are senses, we hear, think, smell, and so forth. Because of that sense contact, feeling arises. There is pleasure, pain, or neutral feeling, feelings of interest, aversion, excitement, whatever it might be. Initially it is just a feeling, then from feeling there arises desire. Pleasant feeling will give rise to the desire to get a hold of, to get closer to: 'Whoo, what's that? Smells good!' This is feeling turning into craving. There is sense contact, feeling, then craving arises from that. If it's painful or unpleasant we withdraw from it, we desire to get away from it. Craving leads to clinging, *upadana*, attachment.

*Upadana* leads to what is called 'becoming' (*bhava* in Pali). I like to picture this as a rising wave. The mind grabs hold of an experience: 'I wonder if they need any help down in the kitchen? Yes, I'm sure they do. I could peel a chestnut or two. I could really be useful down there.' This is *upadana*. Then *bhava* is actually getting up off our cushion and heading down the stairs. Becoming is aiming toward the object of desire and acting on that. *Bhava* is what the consumer society runs on. This is what



the entire advertising industry and the consumer culture are aimed at fostering: the thrill of me just about to get what I want.

Then *jati* (birth) comes after that. Birth is the moment we get what we want. It's the moment of no turning back. At *bhava* we can still withdraw. We can be all the way down the stairs and then think, 'Get back in there. *Come on*, he's halfway through a Dhamma talk. This is really too much!' There is still time to get out of it. But *jati* is where there's no turning back. The die is cast, and we're in there spinning our story to the cook and getting what we want.

'Oh yes, I could use some help. Could you stir this for me and then taste it?'

We think, 'Ahhh, I've got it!' That's the moment of getting what we want. Then, following upon the moment of getting what we want, there is the rest of it. After we're born, as we all know, there is a lot of life that happens. After the moment of birth comes the entire lifespan. After the moment of thrill has passed and we've managed to do as much tasting as we can deal with, the excitement of it starts to fade away. The feelings of embarrassment arise: 'Good grief where am I? Dragged around by my nose, when am I going to get *over* this?!' Feelings of self-criticism, self-disparagement, and disappointment assail us: 'It didn't taste that good after all. After all of that ... I sat there for twenty minutes cranking myself up for it, and then they put too much salt in it.'

This is what is called *soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa*: 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair'. So then what happens? There we are, we feel kind of mucky, disappointed, down. This is *dukkha*. Essentially that long word just means *dukkha*; it feels bad.

So what do we do when we feel bad? This is interesting—the Buddha said, 'Dukkha ripens in two ways: either as continuing the round of rebirth or in search.' So the first of these means we feel mopey and wretched, and then we think, 'Maybe they need some help with the *cake*!'

What happens if we don't awaken is that we



go back to the time when we last felt really good, which was at the *bhava-jati* junction when the thrill hit. That was the last time we felt good. So we just go back to where we last felt good and try it again. And again and again and again ...

'Dukkha ripening as search' means we realize, 'I've been through this 153,485 times, *enough*; this is *enough*. How can I get out of this? What can I do? What's going on here? What is this pattern?' We are pretty thick creatures—and I speak from personal experience. We take a lot of pounding before we learn some of these lessons.

We can be very convincing. We really build ourselves up and excuse ourselves. But eventually we recognize that trying to find happiness through that kind of gratification does not work. Even though we get fooled and lose it, something in our hearts knows: this does not work. This is what we mean by 'search', looking for the roots of how the whole thing operates.

### Escape from the Cycle of Birth and Death

In meditation, as you've probably noticed, we begin with that kind of lesson. Life smacks us in the face and says, 'Wake up.' Or we begin to notice a pattern. We see ourselves following this through and think, 'What an idiot. Why do I keep doing this?!' Slowly, the more that we practice with it, we can catch the process earlier and earlier on, so that as we see ourselves getting entangled, grasping, clinging, feeling the discomfort of that, then we know to let go. The more our awareness gets refined and we bring clearer and clearer attention to the flow of experience,

the more we find we can begin to catch the process where craving turns into clinging or where feeling turns into craving. We can experience a pleasant feeling but not let it turn into craving, or a painful feeling and not let it turn into hatred.

By meditating on physical discomfort, we can see that there is a way that there can be pain in the body but that we are not suffering because of it. The pain is one thing, and the suffering we create around it is another. We can be quite at peace with it. There's the feeling, but it's not giving rise to desire, craving. Just as, if we're experimenting with eating one mouthful at a time, food can be delicious but we're not adding anything to it, we are not getting crazy for the next mouthful. It's simply, 'This tastes good.' End of story. We are more able to be with that experience because we are not racing on to the next thing, or not opinionating about it. We loosen the process in this way.

The more full the awareness is, the more we sustain mindfulness—a whole-hearted awareness—the less the process of craving and dukkha kicks into action. When there is no loss of mindfulness, then that polarity, the sense of self and other, is not so strong. The sense of 'me' in here and 'the world' out there, even that is loosened; it's not solidified. Then when there is a sound or a feeling, a sensation or memory, an emotion, any kind of sensory or mental impression, it is seen for what it is. It is not given a life of its own. It ceases.

By breaking the chain of causation at clinging or craving, or where feeling turns into craving, or even at the very beginning—by not allowing ignorance to arise but sustaining awareness—then the causes of dukkha are removed. If there are no causes, then suffering will not arise. 'When there is not this, then that does not come to be. When this ceases, that also ceases.' This is what we mean by the ending of birth and death, the ending of rebirth.

The process of Dependent Origination as a whole is also known as the *bhavacakka*, the cycle or wheel of rebirth. The terminology 'getting off the wheel' or 'ending birth and death', describes the very process that I've just outlined. Principally this

is what Theravada Buddhist practice is all about: the ending of rebirth, not being born again.

We get born into all kinds of things. It's not just what happens in the maternity ward. Birth is happening many, many times a day. We can look at it on an external, physical level, but more directly we can see the whole process happening over and over on a psychological level.

Every one of us, I'm sure, has had at least a moment or two in the last few days when the mind was at its clearest—those 'best moments' are when we're not being born into anything. Rebirth has ended. The mind is awake, and there is peacefulness, clarity. There's no sense of self. There's no time or place—just 'Is-ness', 'Such-ness'. Everything is fine. We're actually at our most alive, and life is at its most perfect. Just on the tangible, experiential level, 'not being born' is far from being a wipeout experience of nothingness or not feeling anything, a total anaesthesia. It has more to do with being both completely alive and also completely undefined. It is a sense of awareness that has no form or place, and has nothing to do with time or individuality.

This can be hard to conceptualize, but when we talk about 'not being born again', we are talking about the personal, the individual, the idea of a separate self that is not being crystallized. When we try to create an idea of what we are, we wonder, 'Well, what *is* a person anyway? Surely if I'm not reborn, I've got to go somewhere, or something has got to happen. What happens?'

### ***The Goal***

There was an occasion when a wanderer named Vacchagotta came to ask the Buddha the question, 'Where do enlightened beings go when they die?'

The Buddha said, 'If we had a little fire burning in front of us and let it go out, then I asked you, "Where did the fire go, north, south, east, or west? What would you say?"'

Vacchagotta furrowed his brow and said, 'It didn't go anywhere. It just went out. The question doesn't apply.'

The Buddha said, 'Exactly so, Vacchagotta. The

way you phrased the question presumes a reality that does not exist' (72.16–20). We cannot say an enlightened being *goes* any-where. The state of an enlightened one at the breaking up of the body is indescribable.

So this points to the Goal. In the Theravada world, we talk about the goal of the spiritual life as the realization of Nibbana. It has an inscrutable quality to it. It frustrates the thinking mind, but I feel it is very important to have at least a sense for what this is referring to—awakening our intuitive sense of the Ultimate. It's also important to know that the Buddha didn't speak of this Goal as something that can only be realized after the death of the body.

There is a principle that the Buddha talked about which is known as 'the unapprehendability of the enlightened'. Anuradha, a young monk, has been challenged by some brahmins, who ask him, 'What happens to enlightened beings when they die?'

He replies, 'The Buddha does not answer that question.'

'You must be either someone who is really stupid, or else newly gone forth into your tradition, otherwise you'd give us a straight answer.'

Anuradha later repeats this discussion to the Buddha and asks, 'Did I answer well, or did I answer badly?'

The Buddha says, 'You answered well, Anuradha.' He went on to instruct him further, 'Anuradha, do you see the Tathagata as *being* the five *khandhas* [body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and discriminative consciousness]?'

'No, Venerable Sir.'

'Do you see the Tathagata as *having* the five *khandhas*?'

'No, Venerable Sir.'

'Do you see the Tathagata as *not having* the five *khandhas*?'

'No, Venerable Sir.'

'Do you see the Tathagata as *being in* the five *khandhas*?'

'No, Venerable Sir.'

'Do you see the Tathagata as *being apart from*

the five *khandhas*?'

'No, Venerable Sir.'

'Exactly so, Anuradha. Therefore, if the Tathagata is unapprehendable here and now, while the body is still alive, how much more so after the breaking up of the body after death? What I teach, Anuradha, now as formerly, is dukkha and the ending of dukkha.'<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha, in the Theravada tradition, is always pulling away from creating a metaphysical description of Nibbana, the Beyond, Ultimate Reality. Instead he always comes right back to the focus of: 'If there is suffering, it's because there is clinging to something. An identity is being created.' That's all we need to know. The rest is whipped cream. Over and over again such abstruse philosophical questions were put to the Buddha, and over and over again he would bring it back to: 'I teach only dukkha and the ending of dukkha.'

It's not a matter of creating the perfect philosophical model (and then getting lost in it) but looking at how we feel now, what's happening within our heart right now. As we recognize that, as we see dukkha being created, we trace it back. We realize there's been some clinging; the clinging came from craving; the craving came from feeling; and the feeling came from that contact. We realize, 'Aha! It was that thought that triggered this.' We see that and let it go. This is *dukkha-nirodha*, the ending of suffering.

The ending of suffering is not some kind of Armageddon, a cosmic healing at the ending of time. The ending of suffering occurs at exactly the place where the suffering is generated. When we trace back some particular event of dukkha, when we see where it has arisen from and let go of it right there, then there is no suffering.

I offer this Dhamma feast for your reflection.



## References

1. *Anguttara Nikaya*, 10.92.
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# ***The Heart of Mahayana Buddhist Practice in the West***

**Rev. Heng Sure**

I GREW up in the 1950s and 60s in Toledo, Ohio, of Scots-Irish ancestry, and was president of my high school student council as well as my church's Methodist Youth Fellowship. My childhood was as mainstream mid-American as corn on the cob. My first encounter with Asian religion happened when I took a Chinese language class in high school and then picked up a bilingual ancient Buddhist scripture in the local public library. I knew I had to find out why the book's Chinese characters felt strangely familiar and compelling. In college my roommate introduced me to Buddhist meditation; he later became a disciple and ordained monk under a Chinese Buddhist Chan master. When I got to the University of California, Berkeley to study Buddhism in 1972, I drove across the bridge to Gold Mountain Monastery to visit my roommate.

Inside the door of Gold Mountain, my first impressions were physical: I noticed the chill in the air, smelled the sandalwood incense, and marvelled at the three large Buddhas seated in full lotus posture on a raised dais with gold-coloured dragons curling around the roof. Then I heard the tapping of a 'wooden fish' drum and the rhythmic chanting of mantras, and saw the Caucasian monks and nuns wearing robes and bowing in the Buddha hall. I saw my former college roommate who had ordained as a monk. He was sitting beside Master Hsuan Hua and translating his Mandarin Chinese dharma talk into English. His head was shaven, and he wore a long robe and a dark brown sash clasped over his left shoulder. If it weren't for the audio headphones over his ears he might have stepped out of a Tang Dynasty court painting. I had an epiphany: I knew

I had returned to my spiritual home.

Three years after entering Gold Mountain, I knelt on a platform in a monastery in rural Northern California called the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and professed the many vows taken by Buddhist monastics since the time of the Buddha, 2,500 years ago. Strange to say, promising to live with so many precepts felt not at all repressive. Instead, as I stepped into the lineage of monks and nuns of ages past, my heart felt liberated and joyful. My spiritual aspirations seemed to be supported by high-flying wings. By taking the Bhikshu precepts, I set aside the cultural perspectives of an American college student of the 1970s and become a celibate monk, a vegetarian, a mendicant. I vowed to replace my anything-goes lifestyle for the values of the Buddha's Bhikshu Sangha, the longest-running monastic fraternity on the planet.

### ***Learning to Bow***

Taking the vows is a ritual process; living into the vows required bone-deep changes. When I think back to what I went through in making these changes, certain peak experiences emerge from the mist of memory.

One of those moments was learning to bow. Even though I've done lots of bowing, my initial experience with bowing was full of hesitation and questions. On Saturday mornings at Gold Mountain Monastery, the Western monks and nuns lead the newcomers in bowing to an English translation of the repentance liturgy of Medicine Master Buddha. Men and women bowed on two sides of the hall while chanting passages of text and the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When I bowed the

first few times, pictures from Sunday school arose to mind: I recalled stories of God punishing the Israelites for worshipping graven idols. How was bowing to Buddha images any different? For a long time the gesture seemed forced and unnatural, but I stuck with it, in large part because there was a vegetarian lunch immediately afterward and I was a graduate student cooking for myself in a studio apartment in Berkeley. After half an hour of bowing and chanting, I realized my body felt unusually comfortable. My thoughts slowed down, my breathing was deep and regular, and tension left my shoulders. Bowing felt like yoga, only more spiritually focused.

Bowing also allowed my mind to contemplate the text of the liturgy. The bowing provided a space for the words of the Dharma-teaching to go deep into my consciousness:

Therefore the sicknesses of living beings are one single illusory sickness, and the medicines given by the Tathagata (the Thus Come One) are, likewise, one illusory medicine ... So we can know that all the Dharma spoken by the Tathagata has a single quality and a single flavour. It is the quality of liberation, the quality of leaving (affliction), the quality of cessation, and ultimately, the quality of Nirvana. In the end, it returns to emptiness.

Bowing to this deep insight felt transformative and healing. Master Hua instructed us that bowing was not for the purpose of getting anything; instead, we bowed to get rid of pride and arrogance and to create room for goodness in our minds once pride was gone. This made sense: most religions teach that pride is a sin. Bowing with my head at shoe-top level, I found it more difficult to feel arrogant; instead, I felt humble and soft. I contemplated how many of my mistakes in life had come from loneliness, from a feeling of brokenness, and from alienation from others. On Saturday mornings at Gold Mountain,

when the bowing was over, I felt relieved of a burden, lighter and more connected with the world around me and the people in it. The feeling of connection remained for hours. Bowing became a practice I willingly and literally threw myself into.

When I eventually moved over to the monastery from Berkeley, I asked my monk-roommate for an appropriate practice to begin my cultivation. He suggested I bow to a sutra text, one character

at a time. This immediately struck me as a ridiculous notion. I was studying for my master's degree at a prestigious public university; I was always reading half a dozen books and newspapers at once. Bowing down to one book, one character at a time, simply seemed

too slow. He anticipated my reluctance and said, 'Don't think about it, don't talk about it, just do it, and tell me later how it felt.'

I lit a stick of incense, opened the Flower Adornment Sutra (Avatamsaka Sutra), and grumbling to myself that this was a waste of time, made the first bow to the first character: *da* for 'great' or 'large'. One hour later, I had bowed onto the second page, and my mind had downshifted into a slower gear, in tune with my bowing metabolism. I contemplated the characters one by one and had another epiphany: reading great books slowly enhances the comprehension and appreciation. All printed works are not created equal. Bowing with the body moves the mind towards respect; speed-reading deprives the reader of much of the value of written communication.

Since then I dedicated years of my monastic formation to bowing, to making ritual prostrations. I made a pilgrimage at one point in my early monastic formation, bowing to the ground once every three steps. It took thirty-three months of steady bowing to travel from South Pasadena, California,



*City of Ten Thousand Buddhas*

up the Pacific Coast Highway to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah. The pace of bowing and the insights gained from putting my body prone to the ground thoroughly amended my approach to reading and enhanced my respect for sacred books and their effect on the mind and spirit.

### **Taking Refuge**

Like many westerners, I first discovered Buddhist thought and concepts through books. I read Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, and found an English translation of the Sixth Patriarch's Sutra in my public library. To step up from being a reader on Buddhism to becoming a Buddhist disciple, the Mahayana tradition offers the ceremony for 'Taking Refuge with the Three Jewels' (*trisharana*) and receiving the Five Precepts (*panchashila*).

I recall the day I took the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts at Gold Mountain Monastery; the Venerable Abbot Master Hsuan Hua said, 'Today is your new birthday. You may consider everything you've done heretofore as over and gone. You can consider that everything you will do and who you will become is born anew today as a disciple of the Buddha.'

Given the bad habits I had as a graduate student living in an extended family in the Berkeley Hills, I realized I could benefit from some wholesome lifestyle changes. Because the integrity of the teacher was believable, and because I had had enough of my confusion and was committed to change, the choices offered by the refuges and precepts seemed to be a practical first step along the path towards

*Bowing...*



wisdom.

From the point of view of the Chinese Mahayana, the act of 'Taking Refuge with the Triple Jewel' is the equivalent of baptism or christening in the Christian faith. One takes refuge in a ninety-minute ritual procedure, wherein one asks for a teacher to transmit the refuges, invites the 'Permanently Abiding Triple Jewel' to draw near and bless the event, repents of past offences, and then vows to take the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as one's new spiritual affiliation.

The presiding Master confers a dharma-name on the new disciples, and from then on that name represents one's connection to an ancient lineage of Buddhist disciples stretching back to the historical Buddha himself. I felt a weight lift from my heart soon after taking refuge; a fundamental struggle between alienation and belonging had been settled. Clearly, the act of taking refuge was more than a ritual; also it became clear that the answer to my search for identity was a spiritual matter, and lay beyond the physical body my parents gave birth to.

### **The Five Precepts**

A next step into the Dharma comes by requesting and receiving the Five Precepts. This ceremony allows one to make a life-long promise to refrain from taking life, from stealing, from engaging in sexual misconduct (generally interpreted as refraining from adultery and promiscuity, or more strictly, as staying chaste until marriage), from telling lies, and from using intoxicants of any kind.

Requesting these precepts required me to make a major change in my thinking about personal freedom and rules. I grew up as a typical American boy, defining freedom as doing whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted to. I watched movies and television serials that celebrated outlaws and mavericks, secret agents and cowboys. In popular culture, self-made people and rugged individuals took as much freedom as they could get away with. Rules were for ordinary citizens who couldn't find a way around them, in the thinking of the time. I asked my monk friend how many precepts a Bhikshu observed, and

I was shocked at the answer: over three hundred! I could not comprehend how anybody could live with so many rules. Yet the people who held precepts did not look oppressed or miserable in any way; in fact, quite the opposite. When I observed that monks lived without money, possessions, family, stimulants, newspapers, or television, I questioned how such a lifestyle could survive in the affluent marketplace of North America.

On Buddha's birthday in 1972, I drank tea with my monk friend later in the afternoon, after the crowds of disciples had dispersed. He told me that the Buddha's monastic Sangha is one of the oldest direct democracies in the world: decisions are made by asking consensus of all the monks. Authority in the Sangha comes from virtue and seniority in precepts. The Sangha is free of class distinctions: within the Sangha, from the Buddha's time, farmers, scholars, and princes cultivated side by side and shared their material goods equally. Further, the Sangha gave women the right to access the highest goals of cultivation without gender bias. In sixth century BCE India, this was revolutionary; to-day in the religious world, it still remains rare.

Monks walk with their alms-bowls through towns, but they do not beg. They do not even speak, nor do they accept money. The monks instead serve as 'fields of blessings', that is to say, they make themselves available for lay-people who care to practise generosity by offering food. Supporting the lifestyle of a cultivator of the path to wisdom has always been regarded as meritorious to the giver, hence the name 'field of blessings Sangha'.

### **Monks and Society**

Monks are not social parasites. They give to society by preserving literacy and knowledge of the path to spiritual wisdom. Monks teach school, they

write and translate, they live lightly on the earth ecologically speaking, needing only a few vegetables a day to sustain their lives. Their monasteries preserve green space, offer stewardship of nature, and provide refuge for animals. By taking men out of the army, the Sangha serves as a counter-point

to a nation's militarization and rulers' aspirations for armed conflict and political domination through force. Monks thus directly contribute to a more peaceful society. Throughout history the Buddha's monastic Sangha, with certain exceptions, has rarely marched to war under the Buddha's flag, and does not pray for the military victory of one army over another. Removing

young men from the possibility of bearing arms significantly affects the policies of a nation towards peace and war, in ways both visible and invisible.

In the West, where the marketplace dominates so much of our social identity, monks take the revolutionary stance of refraining from mercantile activity. For example, I held the precept of not touching money for the first twenty-five years of my life as a monk. Monks who observe that practice hold no personal assets; they have no savings account, credit cards, or checking accounts. This was only possible because some monks were willing to pay the bills and keep the monastery's accounts. Monks eat vegetables, and wear the same robes year after year; our needs are simple and easily met. Since the Sangha lives low on the food chain, having access to cash was not important. Not touching money did not restrict my freedom; the effect on my mind of leaving the marketplace behind was profoundly liberating. I did not need ATMs or banks, catalogues, advertisements, sales, or credit reports. My body rarely went into stores or malls. Most significant of all was that my mind didn't go into stores either; I spent no mental effort thinking about things



*Fields of blessings*



to buy or trade. The amount of time this practice freed up is considerable. The freedom that comes from knowing self-sufficiency, from not needing anything, is the true reward of not holding money. One thought of sufficiency exposes the seduction of advertising's manufactured desire. By stepping away from the urge to consume, one can see the illusion of happiness based on getting stuff and the myth of the marketplace as it really is.

Manufacturers issue new products on a cycle; advertising creates the illusion of need and pushes consumers away from contentment with their old possessions into craving the new items. Getting the desired item rarely delivers the happiness that was promised, and affliction is the result.

Socially, the impact of a group of people who don't participate in the illusion of the marketplace is powerful and wholesome. Members of the Buddha's Sangha are not mercantile beings; they leave the marketplace behind; they hold their wealth and goods in common. They pay attention instead to the desire-thoughts in the mind that create greed and discontent and that move the mind away from satisfaction and well-being.

### ***A Wisdom-based Moral Code***

Seen from the perspective of the Buddha's wish to end sentient beings' suffering, the Sangha's precepts appear as a different set of rules from those I rebelled against as an adolescent. The rules the Buddha taught came not from social conventions legislated by bodies of lawmakers, argued by lawyers and courts, enforced by police, and punished by jails. Precepts, particularly the Bodhisattva Precepts, came from the Buddha's insight. After his great awakening, he saw the potential perfection of human nature and how certain behaviours harm that nature and delay progress on the path towards liberation. He gave the precepts as guidelines on a map past the pitfalls of behaviour that obstruct Bodhi, or awakening. Holding the Buddha's precepts does not restrict freedom, it speeds you on your way to the end of suffering and the birth of wisdom.

From this viewpoint, the precepts of the Sangha appear not as repressive; rather they create a brotherhood and sisterhood of vow-holders who devote their lives to protecting and sustaining the Buddha's code of ethics, the path to liberation that is egalitarian, wisdom-based, and socially engaged.

By giving his disciples a moral code that was based on wisdom, the Buddha lifted his Sangha out of the mundane cultural standards of caste, wealth, gender, and privilege. He offered membership in the Sangha to women, to outcasts, to the poor and the rich alike. The patchwork robe and shaven head of the Sangha made it possible for people to set aside superficial distinctions and culture-bound limitations and to walk the path to spiritual growth and human evolution. For these reasons I feel that Buddhism, seen in this light, will redefine freedom in the West and teach us a deeper dimension of democracy and equality.

### ***Mahayana Buddhist Practice at Gold Mountain Monastery***

Master Hua taught a traditional form of monasticism. He encouraged his students to meditate in full lotus, to be on time for hours of ceremonies, to eat only one vegetarian meal a day. Master Hua taught an authentic and living tradition that came directly from the Chan masters of antiquity. I had done sporadic Zen-style meditation in Japan, but zazen was only one of the daily practices at Gold Mountain Monastery.

Practice is central in the Buddha's teachings, and is emphasized much more than belief in doctrine per se. Practices are many, and come grouped in various sets, schools, and traditions. These include the study of the Vinaya, which teaches moral guidelines for the monastic and lay community as well as organizational principles for the Sangha community. Chan practice (Japanese: Zen) focuses on seated meditation and the various ways to use the mind while meditating. Pure Land practice teaches devotion to the Buddha Amitabha and seeking rebirth in his Pure Land. Mantra practice teaches memorizing and reciting mantras and practising

mudras. Sutra practices investigate the scriptures, and include various intellectual approaches to the Buddha's discourses and later commentaries including memorizing and explaining, as well as commenting on them. On any given day throughout the year, Mahayana practitioners, monastic and lay alike, will observe precepts, meditate, recite the Buddha's name, chant man-



*The muyu, or wooden-fish drum*

tras, and listen to or study sutras. After many centuries in China, entire monasteries developed around specific practices: some teachers taught students exclusively to recite the Buddha's name, others to practice Chan meditation. Monastic Buddhism in the West has not yet reached its first complete century, so the variety of practices appears throughout the day in each monastery.

### **The Daily Round**

From my first day of retreat thirty-one years ago, the sights, sounds, and smells that accent a day of practice in a Mahayana monastery have been my regular environment. The daily schedule is similar for most Chinese monastic communities, and the same is true to a large extent for Vietnamese and Korean monasteries. The sound of a wooden mallet striking a stiff board wakes the monks at 3.30 a.m. Thirty minutes later, monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen enter the main hall and stand at bowing benches before the Buddha images on the main altar. Men stand to one side of the hall, women to the other. Those individuals who observe more precepts stand to the front. A nun lights a stick of sandalwood incense and places it in the large censor in the middle of the altar. The monk who serves as master of ceremonies will strike a large brass bowl-shaped bell, and then lead everybody to make three prostrations, bowing slowly down to a cushion on the floor. The Mahayana style of bow is called a 'five-point bow', meaning that the person bowing first puts his or her two knees, two hands, and then forehead onto the

cushion, pauses briefly for contemplation, and then rises, lifting head, knees, and hands. After three slow bows he or she makes a half bow from the waist. All participants perform these bows, cued by a small hand-bell.

The master of ceremonies chants the opening phrases of the Shurangama Mantra, the 'Great Compassion Mantra', the 'Ten Small Mantras', and 'Heart

of Prajna Paramita Sutra', while a wooden drum keeps time to a slow rhythmic metre. Mantras are chanted in Chinese syllables meant to approximate Sanskrit sounds. After the mantras are finished, which takes thirty minutes, the assembly chants the praises of Medicine Master Buddha, and circumambulates the hall while reciting the Buddha's name. The service includes the Ten Kings of Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, and a vow to take refuge in the Triple Jewel: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Finally, the assembly sings praises to Vajrapani and Sarasvati, two celestial Bodhisattvas, and makes prostrations to the lineage of ancestral patriarchs. This morning chanting service continues throughout the year without change.

Following morning chanting, the novice monks and nuns, as part of their monastic formation, make ritual prostrations for an hour, chanting '*Namo ben-shi shi-jia-mou-ni fo*; namo fundamental teacher Shakyamuni Buddha' as they rise and bow on alternate sides of the hall.

An hour of meditation anchors each day in stillness. The Chan tradition teaches sitting in full lotus posture and encourages meditators to investigate a meditation topic (*hua-tou*). Many people investigate the question, 'Who is mindful of the Buddha?' Meditation periods are an hour long, interspersed with twenty minutes of walking. Then at 7 o'clock, everybody returns to the Buddha Hall to recite the Flower Adornment Sutra for an hour. The chanting is done primarily in Chinese, each word accompanied by the sound of the *muyu*, the wooden-

fish drum. The melody rises and falls in a pattern, and since the Sutra is long, the group moves through the text sequentially throughout the year. At 8 a.m., the laity eat breakfast, while the monks and nuns begin their workday. Some teach in the schools, some administer the monastery's finances and paperwork, some cut grass and maintain the buildings, some translate scriptures, some take care of the grounds, tend gardens, or prepare food.

The entire assembly pauses at 10.30 for the meal blessing, a twenty-minute ceremony of chanting to express gratitude for the offering of food, and then walks in file to the dining hall for the communal meal. The community eats together in silence, and the meal is completely vegetarian. Some of the vegetables and fruit are grown in the monastic gardens; the starch and condiments are offered by lay donors.

After lunch and a thirty-minute rest, people gather in the Buddha Hall to bow the 'Great Compassion Repentance'. This ceremony is ninety minutes long, and after offerings and repentance, includes the chanting, twenty-one times, of the 'Great Compassion Mantra'. This mantra is intended to instil in each practitioner the compassionate heart of Guan Shi Yin (Avalokiteshvara) Bodhisattva. The wooden fish keeps time while the assembly circles the hall, reciting the eighty-seven phrases of the Great Compassion Mantra in unison to a rising and falling melodic line. From the end of the Repentance everybody returns to his or her own allotted work.

Work period continues until 5 p.m., when everybody gathers to meditate before evening chanting at 6.30 p.m. Every night at 7.30 the community meets to listen to a lecture on a Mahayana sutra text. Master Hsuan Hua began this custom in 1968, making it a priority in the community to open the



*Guan Shi Yin*

scriptures and explain the words of the Buddha line by line. 'Turning the Dharma-wheel' in this way has become a hallmark of Chinese Buddhism in the West, and the intent is to translate the Buddha's voice in the Mahayana Sutras into the world's languages. To end the day the assembly chants the Heart of the Shuran-

gama Mantra 108 times and then returns to their rooms to rest.

### **Devotion**

Individuals who think that Buddhism is only meditation are often surprised to discover that the Pure Land devotion is the dominant form of practice for Mahayana Buddhists of East Asia. The Pure Land tradition arises from the vows of the Buddha Amitabha, who vowed to create a paradise in the West called Sukhavati, 'Utmost Happiness', where suffering would not exist. He vowed that anybody who recited the words 'Namo Amitabha' (I return and rely on the Buddha of Infinite Radiance) would at the time of death be reborn into a lotus flower in the Land of Utmost Happiness. When that person's karma is purified, the lotus will open and the person will see the Buddha and emerge into Amitabha's Pure Land.

There are reasons why recitation of the Buddha's name became the most popular form of practice: you can recite even if you can't read the texts; you can recite if your body can't endure the physical demands of Chan meditation. You can recite while walking, cooking, waiting in line at the bank, or riding the bus. The only requirements for success are faith, vows, and regular practice. Another reason that Amitabha's Dharma-door became popular was that during hard times, during famine, catastrophic droughts, floods, and civil conflict, the description of Amitabha's Pure Land offered an attractive and conflict-free alternative to a mundane

reality filled with misery.

In the monastery people recite the Buddha's name from morning to night. While the goal is to be reborn in the Pure Land after death, alternately, people can recite steadily until body and mind reach a state of single-minded concentration known as 'The Buddha-recitation Samadhi'. This state, according to accomplished Pure Land masters, is indistinguishable from the samadhi one can attain while doing Chan meditation.

### ***Buddha's Onward March***

Mahayana Buddhist practice has great potential to find a permanent home in the West. The Buddha practised scientifically. The Buddha can, without pushing the point, qualify as a disciplined and rational researcher. The Buddha's six years of ascetic practice were conducted methodically, scientifically, in that he carried on empirical experiments beneath the trees and in the clearings of Nepal's forests. He learned spiritual disciplines, proposed and tested hypotheses, applied variables, corrected errors, and retraced his steps. He applied the successful methods, left a paper trail (the sutras), and later made his discoveries accessible and testable for later experimenters.

Buddhism has already caught on in the West because Buddhist meditation is oriented towards psychology. For the last dozen years, on Thursday nights, the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery has hosted the local Vipassana group, usually about eighty individuals who come to meditate and listen to a Dharma-talk. The meditators are adults, some in their sixties and seventies, and most are affluent mainstream Californians. Many are culturally Jewish or self-identified as 'wounded Catholics in recovery'. The most interesting demographic feature of this group is their profession—among the regulars, nearly one in three is a psychotherapist or someone who studied psychology in school.

Why the popularity of Buddhist meditation among psychologists? The Buddha successfully performed radical psychotherapy on himself, using his own body and mind as a laboratory. He observed

the rising and falling of thoughts, he saw patterns, he saw ideas and impulses arrive and leave; and then over time he noticed deeper strata of mind that did not shift. He analyzed the personality and identified its components: body, feelings/sensations, thoughts, deeper mental structures, and consciousness.

I had a friend in graduate school who studied for his doctorate in clinical psychology. His original motive was to understand mind and to understand the human condition. He turned to psychology only to discover that advanced academic study of the mind required him to experiment with white rats and do statistical and demographic studies of groups of citizens in Marin County, California. He pushed through to completion of his degree but his early interest in Freud's discoveries was left far behind.

He and so many other psych students found that Buddhist meditation delivered real-time, hands-on study of the mind in vivo, with its neuroses and its wonders intact. For a culture that largely sees itself through the lens of psychology, to have the Buddha sutras explain the landscape of a healthy, perfected human mind is a most welcome revelation.

The Buddha's sutras can be explained as blueprints of his consciousness; his discourses to the monks and nuns contain descriptions of the workings of the mind, when healthy, as well as methods for countering afflictions and neuroses.

These observations sketch a framework for the arrival of Mahayana Buddhist practice in America. Since history repeats itself, and as it took two centuries for Mahayana practice to put its roots down in China after its coming from India, it may require another hundred and fifty years for a truly Western Buddhism to arise from the soil of North America. Whatever form it takes, the monastic Sangha will surely play a prominent role in its development, and the democratic, science-friendly, and psychologically sound aspects of the Dharma will certainly have a hand in developing the Buddhism that leaves the West and returns at last to the land of its birth, to India.



# ***Knowledge, Love, and Union: A Glimpse into the Christian Contemplative Tradition***

**Father Paul of Jesus**

**T**O some Indians, it may seem presumptuous that a westerner should write to them about meditation and contemplation, even if it is only about the Christian contemplative tradition. After all, India is the *mother of meditation*. And historically, Christians have not been especially known for their capacity to meditate. The world may admire their teachings on brotherly love, their care for the poor, their schools and their hospitals—everything pertaining to active works of charity—but generally it would not look to Christians as masters of meditation or contemplation in the same way it would look to Hindus or Buddhists.

## ***Hindu and Christian, Same Spiritual Treasures***

Yet there have been people—like Dom Henri Le Saux (known in India as Swami Abhishiktananda), who practised both Hindu and Christian contemplation, who experienced Advaita as deeply as Sri Ramakrishna had experienced Christianity—who arrived at the staunch belief that Christianity possesses the same spiritual treasures that Hinduism does. But Christians are generally unaware of the spiritual riches they possess. It might almost be said of Christians that they are sometimes like beggars sitting on a heap of gold while asking passers-by for alms. They don't always realize that they are already sitting on that heap of gold.

It was Swami Abhishiktananda's intimate conviction that India can help Christians find and fructify their own treasure, that India can reveal meditation and contemplation to the Church, and

that when Christians finally re-encounter the gem that lies hidden within them, it will be as the pearl of wisdom for which they are taught to sell all in order to possess; it will be the crest-jewel in their spiritual diadem.

It is commonly said that the indigenous Indian religions are more contemplative and that Christianity is more active. Hindus scrutinize the *innermost* spaces of the soul, while Christians search the *outermost* reaches of space: two infinities—but two infinities that meet when interiority and exteriority embrace as two parts of the same whole. As beyond, so within! ... if we may paraphrase the Platonist analogy 'as above, so below'.

During the first three centuries of Christianity, persecution stalked Christians to the extent that of the first thirty popes, twenty-eight were put to death by Roman imperial authorities. Martyrdom even came to be admired as the highest form of holiness. Obviously, until Christians acquired stability by becoming tolerated and eventually recognized officially, it was difficult for them to chronicle a purely contemplative tradition. Only the lives of the martyrs and the teachings of the popes were preserved, and then, just by oral tradition at first.

## ***Dionysius the Areopagite and the Journey Back to God***

But by the fifth century, Dionysius the Areopagite wrote theological treatises that were to influence Christian contemplatives for over a thousand years. Islamic oppression had driven many Greek and oriental monks to Italy during the sixth and seventh

centuries. They brought with them the mystical writings of Dionysius, and these treatises were given to the pope, to the emperor Charlemagne and his son, Louis the Pious, who had John Scotus Erigena translate them into Latin. These translations spread throughout Western Christendom during the Middle Ages.

Immersed in Neoplatonism, Dionysius drew much of his knowledge on philosophy and contemplation from Plotinus and Proclus, with notable differences, however. Neoplatonism teaches that the universe emanates from God through different degrees of diminishing perfection, and slowly returns through different degrees back into the Deity. All beings are stripped of their individual identity as they return to their source. Most Christians, however, do not believe that humans emanate from God. Instead of *emanation*, they believe in *theosis*—that is, that human beings are created by Him, and that the soul returns to Him as an individual with an infinite divinized status, through Christ, the incarnation of the Logos, the Word, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

Dionysius indicates that the spiritual journey back to God follows a process of purification, illumination, and union (or perfection), and this is the process that Christian contemplatives have traditionally followed.

### **Purification by Control of the Tongue**

First, purification. When God manifested himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, he told Moses not to approach the burning bush without having removed his sandals. Sandals are made from animal hide and represent the fleshly part of man. Moses was being asked to go beyond sense-perception and concept, to free himself from impassioned thought, because, as that sweetest of modern Christian saints, Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, says, 'It is impossible for the human tongue to express things which the human heart can hardly understand.' The head and



*Dionysius the Areopagite*

the heart, the seeming opposition between two modes of knowledge, will challenge Christian contemplatives for centuries to come as they strive toward the purification that God inevitably requires of them.

With Saint John the Baptist, contemplatives say that their egos must decrease in order that Christ may increase in them. First, they begin by learning to control the tongue and the belly. One of the Egyptian desert fathers, Abbot Agatho, kept a

stone in his mouth for three years so that he could learn to be *silent*. (How different from the Greek orator, Demosthenes, a stutterer who put pebbles in his mouth and shouted above the roar of the sea so that he could learn to *speak* in public!)

They learned to keep their tongue so that they could learn to keep their thoughts and not judge others. Even the chaste were not to judge a fornicator, for judging others is as bad as fornicating, and the God who commands the first spiritual law also commands the second. Experience taught the contemplative that not judging others brings peace of heart and undisturbed meditation.

Another ascetical practice in the purification process is the overcoming of laziness, because the contemplative life strikes a balance between work (Martha) and meditation (Mary). One day, a brother came to see Abbot Silvanus on Mount Sinai and saw the hermits at work. He exclaimed, 'Why do you work for perishable food? Mary has chosen the better part, namely to sit at the feet of the Lord without working.' So the Abbot gave the brother a book and let him read until dinnertime. When the brother asked why the Abbot hadn't called him for dinner, the elder replied: 'You're a spiritual man, you don't need perishable food.' It goes without saying that the brother understood the lesson very quickly.

### **Purification by Non-Attachment**

Contemplatives practise abnegation, poverty, and

non-attachment. One monk, Serapion, sold his copy of the Gospels in order to procure food for some hungry people. Surprised at this, a few brother monks asked Serapion why he had sold his copy of the Gospels, to which he replied, 'I sold the book that told me to sell all I have and give to the poor.'

No contentions can arise between men of such non-attachment. Two elders were living peacefully together in a cell in the Egyptian desert and had never had so much as a single quarrel. One of them said, 'Come on, let's have at least one quarrel, like other men.' The other one said, 'I don't know how to start a quarrel.' The first one said, 'I'll place this brick between us and say it's mine. After that, you'll say, "No, it's mine", and we'll quarrel.' So they placed the brick between them. One said, 'It's mine,' and the other one replied, 'I believe it's mine.' The first one said again, 'It's not yours, it's mine.' To which the other one answered, 'Well then, if it's yours, take it.' So they never managed to get into a quarrel, because of their non-attachment.

Of course, non-attachment goes way beyond a question of bricks. In the highest degree of contemplation, one has to become detached from oneself and from the world out of love for God, and one even has to *abandon God* for love of neighbour, says Richard of St Victor. The very love that drew Christ away from heaven to earth draws them away from God, so to speak, for the human good. Once Abbot Lot told Abbot Joseph that he observed his rule; that he fasted, prayed, meditated, and kept contemplative silence; and that he strove to cleanse his heart of thoughts. 'What more can I do?' he asked. Abbot Joseph stood up and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: 'Why not be totally changed into fire?'

But how do we become totally transformed into fire? By knowing God? By loving Him? By both together? How do we become one single spirit with the Lord, as Saint Paul says (1 Cor., 6.17), or branches of the divine vine? (John, 15.5). We ask these '*how*' questions, because we sometimes forget that it is more difficult to escape the secret em-

brace of God than to follow the arduous path of virtue. It is not a question of attaining union with God—we already have it!—but of being aware of it, of *enjoying* it, because for the Christian, the divinity of Jesus is not separate from the divinity of each being in creation. As Swami Abhishiktananda says, we may not be God, but God plus man does not make two.

### Knowledge

Second, knowledge. There are no false gods, only false ideas about God, yet even a false idea expresses a little something about Him. We have to strip Him of masks and concepts. How can we know and love God if we do not even know and love ourselves? 'Oh Love unknown, unloved,' exclaimed the ecstatic St Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi. We cannot know God with our sorely limited human intelligence, because God is incommunicable and ineffable. Therefore, contemplation ultimately becomes an adoration of



St Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi

that very incommunicability and ineffability in the total beauty and transparency of Being. He is the light of our hearts. We cannot feel God, we cannot conceptualize God. Simply, we are. And this experience is one of sole and simple existence. But how can we perceive it if we delight more in creatures than in the Creator?

God does reveal himself to us, but first we need an intense yearning. We want to know God, but what is he not? Yet, to grasp this 'what-is-he-not?' we have to set aside all bodily concepts of God—such as shape, form, quality, quantity, weight, position, visibility, sensibility—and all operations of the intellect. Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the most soaring intellects the West has ever known, fell into a long ecstasy towards the end of his life.



He set his pen down, never to write again, because great secrets had been revealed to him, not through reasoning, but through divine communication. After his ecstasy he said: 'All that I have written up until now appears to be of little value.' Even human genius cannot grasp God.

When the contemplative comes to understand that God alone suffices, he is ready to set aside all thought, be it good or evil. He rejects *knowing*, in favour of *unknowing*. If a person, no matter how clairvoyant he may be, cannot even comprehend the eminent beauty and capacity of a human soul, as Saint Teresa of Avila says—for 'It is in His image and resemblance that God has created us'—then how can he know God? His mind confounds God with man, and man with God, to the point that he cannot see the one without seeing the other, as Saint Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi tells us. God seeks man and man seeks God, because by nature, like seeks like. In an extremely evocative expression, Saint Angela of Foligno said: 'The world is pregnant with God.' And as she lay dying, she felt that she was standing in the midst of the Trinity, though she remembered no form, not even that of the God-man, but she did hear the words, 'You are I and I am you.' One can only understand this when one has extinguished all intellectual understanding in the pursuit of the unknowing that surpasses all being. Or, as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says: all that is left is 'naked intent'. Intuitive naked intent.

Language falters, for though knowledge *encounters* God, it is love that *unites* us to Him. Can the babe at his mother's breast distinguish between himself and his mother?

### **Love and Union**

Third, love and union. Love is not known because it is not loved. God gives himself to us so that we can love him. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux explains that it is impossible to love God without first being loved by him, without experiencing that love. We can never love God enough even though we might be burning with the fire of love, because,

Saint Bernard continues, the measure of loving God is to love him without measure. How can we love the infinite with measure? 'Love is the spiritual life,' says Thomas Merton. It is life. But it is also death, death to our false self, so that we can be re-born in Christ. It is a kind of crucifixion, but not a crucifixion of the body, not a martyrdom of the flesh—it is a conflagration of the mind, as Saint Bonaventure says in his wonderful *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*.

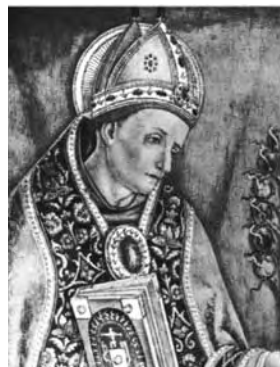
Does that mean that we have to set learning aside? Not at all, because love is a mode of knowing; or, as Saint Gregory the Great formulated it, 'Love is itself understanding.' He who knows little, loves little; and he who loves little, knows little. There is an amusing story about Brother Giles, Saint Francis's third disciple. One day Brother Giles, being himself very simple, asked Saint Bonaventure,

one of the foremost theologians of his time: 'Can a simple person love God as much as a learned person can?' To which Saint Bonaventure replied: 'An old woman can do so even more than a master in theology.' Then Brother Giles arose in fervour of spirit and went

to the part of the garden that overlooked the city of Perugia and cried out: 'Poor little old woman, simple and unlearned, love the Lord God and you will be greater than Brother Bonaventure!' Brother



**Brother Giles**



**Saint Bonaventure**



*The risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene*

Giles himself fell so easily into loving ecstasy that the boys of Perugia used to have fun with him. They would send him into ecstasy just by yelling 'Paradiso! Paradiso!' whenever they saw him. Yes, humans have the capacity to think and to love. God *is* knowledge, just as he *is* love.

Certainly one of the most extraordinary Christian contemplatives is Saint Mary Magdalene. She had been possessed by devils, but she possessed no knowledge. Devils possess knowledge, the knowledge that swells, but Mary Magdalene possessed direct experience. She did more than just remove her sandals, like Moses; with her tears she washed the unshod feet of God incarnate. Jesus did not teach her, he gave her no doctrine; he only gave her the love whereby she was to love him. They communicated in silence. Even on the cross, Jesus spoke to his heavenly Father, to his mother, the Virgin Mary, and to John his beloved disciple, but he did not speak to Mary Magdalene. They communicated in silence, beyond words, beyond thought. Mary Magdalene became a bridge, a passage from the darkest to the most luminous, from death to life, from Eve to the Virgin Mother, from extreme sin to extreme grace. She was the first to recognize the divinity of Christ. She was sanctified immediately, without needing ordinary practices of purification, and if Christ mentioned her former wayward-

ness at all, it was only to honour her love. She became pure capacity, and He became pure torrent of love. She did not even pause to ask whether she was sinful or innocent, but like the real contemplative that she was, filled with the grace of interiority, she was only aware of the goodness of God.

### ***A Coming Contemplative Age?***

From darkness to light ... In the darkness of our time, can we still hope to have real contemplatives among us? Or should we not say that where darkness abounds, the grace of divine light superabounds? Many mystics—like Peter John Olivi and Joachim of Fiore, and even greater ones like Saint Bonaventure—have believed that after this dark age will come a contemplative age. Inspired by Teilhard de Chardin, many think that man does not attain his destiny alone; rather, he attains it with the entire universe. Those who have been lifted up to divine contemplation know that they must return to their brothers and sisters of the earth and teach them that they, too, in the words of the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi, can be transformed into God. Merton says, 'Ours is certainly a time for solitaries and for hermits.' We do not think ourselves wrong in adding, 'Ours, more than ever, is certainly a time for contemplatives whose minds and hearts will burn with the knowledge and love of God.' May God be loved by all hearts! Amen. PB

*Saint Francis in ecstasy*



# Contemplative Spirituality in Islam

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

**T**HERE are many methods of meditation or spiritual discipline which have been prevalent in one form or the other since ancient times. It is generally assumed that while intellectual development is grounded in formal education, meditation belongs to the sphere of informal education. But meditation is actually an independent discipline, its goal being spiritual as well as intellectual development.

In my experience, there are two major schools of spiritual discipline: one based on meditation, and the other on contemplation. The former relates to the heart, and the latter relates to the mind. Personally, I subscribe to the school of contemplation.

The spiritual school based on meditation is known in Muslim history as *tasawwuf*. The reference point of *tasawwuf* is the Quran, but a number of its practices have been derived from the Vedanta. That is why there are great affinities between *tasawwuf* and Hindu philosophy. For instance, the term *lataife-sitta* (six points) in *tasawwuf* has been directly taken from the Hindu system. Probably this was first introduced into the Hindu system, and was then adopted by Muslim Sufis, as they thought it conducive to the attainment of spirituality.

*Lataife-sitta* indicates certain points in the human body which are the centres of spiritual feelings. If these points are fully concentrated upon for a certain period of time, they become activated, and as a result, the entire human personality begins to receive spiritual sustenance. These practices, as well as other such practices, suppress the material proclivities of one's personality and awaken its spiritual aspects.

I feel that I am a born Sufi. My entire life has been one of spiritual contemplation and spiritual

experiences. For quite some time now, I have been running a centre for the purpose of imparting concepts and principles which will enable others to fully share in my experiences. It is called *The Centre for Peace and Spirituality* ([www.cps.org.in](http://www.cps.org.in)). Let me emphasize that my brand of spirituality, which in no way savours of passivity, is entirely based on intellectual awakening. I prefer to call this 'Creative Sufism'.

### The Spiritual Journey

I believe that 'heart-based spirituality' takes man to a level which is, in fact, one of ecstasy. Particular practices and chants produce an ecstatic feeling within the practitioner. This feeling is described as spiritual discovery by the traditional Sufis. But my version of Sufism has all to do with intellectual activity. Such spirituality is produced when man gives serious thought to such questions as, 'Who am I? What is this world around me? What is the creation plan of the Creator for man as well as for the rest of the world?'

Indeed, the journey of spirituality begins with the urge to search for the truth. When a seeker discovers the truth and learns the creation plan of the Creator, his life enters a new phase—that of building the human personality according to spiritual principles.

This journey is entirely intellectual in nature. Its quest is twofold: one is to solve *the riddle of why*—

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He grants wisdom to whom He pleases, and whosoever is granted wisdom is rich indeed. But none will grasp the message except men of understanding.

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—Quran, 2.269

for all men and women undergo negative experiences in this world—and the other is to offer positive solutions. It addresses the paradox of human beings having been given the freedom to make their own moral choices, and their frequent misuse of this liberty—a course of action which causes them to repeatedly face situations in which they do each other harm, where people incur losses because of others' injustice and suffer severe provocations in the form of untoward experiences.

According to one group, there is only one way to preserve one's spirituality, and that is to retire to a desolate place, far from human settlement, where there is nothing to provoke one. It is this viewpoint which is presented in the well-known book titled *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*.

The spiritual school of thought I believe in differs considerably from this. According to this school of thought, man shall have to convert his negative experiences into positive ones. He shall have to convert material experiences into spiritual ones. He shall have to convert non-spiritual matters into spiritual matters.

This is the principle on which the entire material world is based. This principle may be called the principle of conversion. For instance, let us take the case of water. Two gases separately are not water, but, when they combine and convert into another form, they take the form of water. The same is true of the tree. A tree is, in fact, the result of the conversion of non-botanical matter.

The cow provides another such example. The cow ingests not milk, but grass. Then by means of a biological process, this grass is converted into milk. That is to say, the cow is an industry which converts non-milk into milk. An Urdu poet has expressed the same reality: 'The grass which the cow grazed on yesterday in the jungle was converted by her into milk today.'

### **Conversion**

It is said that once a young man met an elderly person who was devoutly religious. The young man took umbrage at something the elderly person had

said to him and kicked him in the chest. This was an incident of a gravely negative nature. But the old man converted this negative experience into a positive one by responding with these words: 'I hope your gentle foot was not hurt by my hard, stony chest.'

According to a Hadith, the Prophet of Islam once observed: 'When someone experiences suffering and yet remains patient, then God converts his flesh and blood into new flesh and blood.'

The conversion takes place in the spiritual rather than the physical sense. It means that responding with patience and thankfulness to suffering becomes a means of spiritual training. Negativity is converted into positivity. The afflicted person then becomes one who loves rather than hates. The plane on which he lives is elevated. He becomes unilateral rather than bilateral in his ethics. Such a spiritual person is produced through a superior intellectual process, which involves his de-conditioning. For this to happen, he has to re-engineer his mind. He has to shake and jolt and remould his personality to fulfill this purpose. He has to turn himself into the kind of person who is shaped not by society, but by the spiritual 'industry'.

According to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the secret of bringing a developed man into existence lies in self-thinking. But in my opinion, that is a half-truth. The whole truth is that the secret of producing a developed man lies in anti-self thinking. The reason for this is that everyone lives in some society or other. This society continually exercises formative influences on his mind, until finally his thinking becomes totally conditioned by those influences. The American psychologist J B Watson wrongly took the man conditioned in this way to be a real man. Actually, he is an artificial rather than a real man.

### **De-conditioning the Conditioned**

The process of spiritual development in fact begins with the de-conditioning of this conditioned mind. The more one de-conditions the mind, the more one will gain in spiritual development. Spiritual



progress is just not possible without taking such a step. The truth is that everyone is born spiritual. Everyone is Mr Nature or Mr Spiritual by birth. But, after birth, he lives in a society which continues to condition him. Spirituality makes it possible to erase this conditioning and allows the individual to revert to the natural state in which he was born. Spiritual science is, in effect, another name for the de-conditioning of the mind. There can be no spirituality without this.

In this respect, the human mind can be likened to an onion. In the centre of the onion, initially, there is a small kernel. Then layers start forming, one upon the other. This process continues until the inner kernel is totally covered with external layers. Now, apparently, layers alone are visible. The kernel is completely covered and remains invisible. To find the kernel of the onion, all the external layers have to be removed. Similarly, all the conditioning has to be removed in order to restore the natural man to his pristine nature. This process of de-conditioning is similar to the removal of the onion's layers. The whole concept of spiritual science is highlighted by this example.

### ***Beyond Ecstasy***

Spirituality is generally taken as something that is opposed to worldliness. People usually assume that the farther they move from material and worldly things, the more spiritual they become. This is the sole reason why human beings run away from cities

and towns to jungles and mountains, leaving behind their homes and their material lives.

Whenever man raises himself above worldly matters and devotes his life to becoming one with the non-material world through meditation, he experiences a very different kind of feeling. This is nothing other than what is generally known as ecstasy. When man enters this state of ecstasy, he experiences an unknown pleasure. On the basis of this experience, people associate ecstasy with spirituality. However ecstasy

is nothing but a reduced form of spirituality.

Man is an intellectual being. He is endowed with a mind, which is his greatest faculty. It is only the possession of this mind and his independent thinking which distinguish him from the animals. Real spirituality is that which has the power to address our minds. Any kind of spirituality attained at a level lower than that of our minds is not true spirituality. All forms of ecstasy are just reduced forms of spirituality

When a scientist discovers the scientific world, he doesn't leave the material world, but rather stays here, studies, and makes discoveries in this very world. Spirituality is also a science. Consequently, in spiritual science the same method is valid—that is, undergoing spiritual experiences while remaining in the material world.

Spirituality, in fact, is a process of converting our everyday material events into spiritual experiences. While living his social life, man is affected by events which trigger negative thoughts such as malice, lust, anger, arrogance, and greed. But when man raises himself above his immediate surroundings—from the material level to a higher level of thinking—he experiences real spirituality. At this elevated level, man is able to eradicate his negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. Thus we can say that there are two levels of thinking, the lower level and the higher level. A higher level of thinking makes man a spiritual person and a lower level of thinking results in the 'animalization' of man, in

which state there is no appreciable difference between the life of a man and that of an animal.

Spirituality, as an intellectual activity, is a science of inner development, and material things indirectly contribute towards that development. In fact, material life is made more meaningful by the proactive role played by spirituality in intellectual refinement and the consequent progress of humanity. Spirituality does not, as some may imagine, arrest the thinking process, but rather enhances intellectual activity in the complete sense of the word. In short, spirituality makes a man a superman. It is a complete way of life.

Spirituality, in its awakening of the mind, provides the best formula for character building. It is a great strength at all times. Spirituality, in effect, is a promoter of all good and a killer of all evils.

### **The Universe: A Source of Divine Inspiration**

The universe has been fashioned by God in a way that it may become a source of spiritual inspiration for man. According to the Quran (15:75), it is the quality of *tawassum* that enables one to find inspiration in the universe. *Tawassum* is the ability to understand the signs of nature—that is, to observe the phenomena of the universe in order to draw lessons from them and receive spiritual nourishment from physical events.

The distinguishing feature of wise people described in the Quran is that they continuously derive such sustenance from their environment, thus maintaining their intellectual and spiritual well-being. This is elaborated upon in the Quran as follows: ‘In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are signs for men of understanding; those that remember God when standing, sitting, and lying down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth (saying): “Lord, You have not created these in vain. Glory be to You! Save us from the torment of the fire, Lord”’ (3:191).

### **A Personal Experience**

It was Thursday morning, 17 June 1999. I was in

Manchester, England, staying in the house of an Arab brother, Alaref Ahmad. While I was sitting in my room on the upper floor, I heard a gentle knock on the door. When I opened it, I found a child of about five years. It was Qanita, the first-born daughter of Brother Alaref. She asked in all innocence and gentleness, ‘Do you need anything; *Turidu haja?*’ Perhaps it was her mother who had sent her, and although this was a simple question, I was quite overwhelmed by this innocent voice, to the extent that I could not utter a single word in reply. This was a normal incident, but in my mind, it became transformed into a supra-normal event. Children are like the flowers of God and little angels. I felt as if God Himself had sent me an angel to discover and meet my needs.

At this moment, a famous Hadith came to mind: ‘Your Lord descends to this worldly haven every day, looks at His servants, and says, “Is there anyone who has a need and asks Me, that I may give it to him?”’

‘Do you need anything?’ was a short question that came from an innocent soul, but it was enough to cause a great revolution in my inner being; something that is referred to by modern scholars as a ‘brainstorm’.

For a while, I felt that I could see the whole universe on the screen of my mind. This was a great spiritual experience, which could not be expressed in human words. In the beginning, it seemed as though God, through a little angel, was saying, ‘O my servant, do you need anything?’ Then the matter extended to include the whole universe with its heavens and its earth.

In fact, it was only a little girl at the door of my room, asking, ‘Do you need anything?’ but in its extended sense it was as if the whole universe was asking the same question.

The vast heaven was saying, ‘Do you need a shelter? Here I am to provide you with one, because God has ordered me to do so.’ The gleaming sun was saying, ‘Do you need light? I am here to supply it and transform your darkness into light.’ The majestic mountains were announcing, ‘Would you

like to be on the highest level in all humanity? I am here at your service to help you attain that high position.' The flowing water in the riverbeds was murmuring, 'Do you want to have a spiritual bath to purify your soul? I am here to offer you that.' And the gusting wind was asking, 'Do you want to tour the universe to see the wondrous signs of God? Here is my back for you to ride on to embark on such a divine journey.' The trees were whispering, 'Would you like to have a personality as radiant as ours? We are here to make your wish a reality.' The fruits on their branches and the crops in their husks were declaring, 'If you crave nourishment for your intellectual and spiritual life, we are here to provide you with it.'

While this reel was playing in my mind, I heard birds chirping, 'O servant of God! Here is good news for you: If you have a need, then God has made the whole universe to serve your needs. God is so generous that He has created the whole of the universe to be at your service, day and night. In addition to this, if you show thankfulness to God, He will give you what is greater than all of this—eternal Paradise, in which there will be "... neither fear nor grievance"' (6.48).

Then, the following Quranic verse came to mind: 'And He gave you all that you asked for' (14.34). This means that whatever is needed for man to live a good life on this earth has been prepared in advance by God, directly and indirectly. Horses, for instance, were directly created, whereas aeroplanes were provided indirectly. The travelling of the voice through the air is an example of direct provision, while its transmission by means of electronic equipment is a form of indirect provision. Perhaps this is what is meant by the following Quranic verse: 'And (He has created) horses, mules and donkeys for you to ride, and as an adornment. And He has created (other) things which are beyond your knowledge' (16.8).

### ***The Purpose of Contemplative Spirituality***

God almighty says, 'O you who believe! Eat of the good things that We have provided for you. And

be grateful to God, if it is Him you worship' (2.172). This means that God almighty has created everything, imaginable and unimaginable, great and small, in the most perfect form. Then, He gave all this free to man. The only price to be paid for these endless blessings is thankfulness; it is man's recognition, from the depths of his heart, that God is the giver and man the receiver.

The Quran mentions as examples of God's beneficiaries the people of Saba. God almighty gave them a sign in the 'two Gardens to the right hand and to the left; (and it was said to them) "Eat of the provision of your Lord, and be grateful to Him: fair is your land and oft-forgiving is your Lord"' (34.15). This means that if man pays the price—that is, gratitude—then not only will he be allowed to avail of these blessings, but more importantly, he will also be rewarded with eternal Paradise, which is a perfect version of this present imperfect world of God.

God almighty bestowed upon man all these material things which he needs if he is to live a good life on this earth. All these things are silently conveying the following message: 'O Man! Are you seeking something greater than all this? Do you want spiritual peace in addition to material peace? Do you want a world of perfection after this imperfect world? Would you like to taste the blessings of God in the world of eternity after you have tasted them in this ephemeral world? Do you wish to have all these comforts as a blessing in the world to come, after you have had them as a trial in this transient world? Would you like to realize your full potential after experiencing the limitation of your capacities in this present world?'

God created a perfect and complete world as an eternal abode for man. Then, He wanted to know who was worthy of inhabiting that eternal world. For this purpose, He created the time-bound and imperfect abode in which we are now living. This life, therefore, is only a test. Man is constantly under the observation of his Lord. With every utterance and movement, man is writing his own eternal destiny. One who, during his pre-death period,



proves himself through his conduct deserving of that world will, in his post-death-period, be rewarded with admission into it. Others, however, will be flung into the universal junkyard, that is hell, condemned for all eternity. So, they will lose both worlds, the present incomplete world as well as the next—the perfect and everlasting world.

God has revealed Himself in two books—the Quran and the universe. The Quran is a literal version of God's word, while the universe, or nature, is a practical demonstration of it. These two are the basic sources of spiritual inspiration for a man who seeks to live a life according to the divine scheme.

This dual source of divine inspiration is mentioned in the Quran in the following verse: 'God is He who raised the heavens without visible supports, then He ascended the throne. He has compelled the sun and the moon to be of service, each pursuing an appointed course; He controls the affairs (of the universe); He makes plain His revelations, so that you may be certain of the meeting with your Lord' (13.2). So, the Quran is like a guidebook. It prepares the mind so that one may properly understand the universe and live in it as desired by God.

So, a *mu'min* (true believer) has precisely that kind of prepared mind. When he sees the universe with its various parts functioning in an absolutely coherent manner, he will spontaneously say: 'There is no god but the one God!' and when he examines it, he will find that there are so many complex happenings in its vastness. Nevertheless, he finds that every part of the universe is highly predictable. With this discovery, he realizes that it is as if God was suggesting that he himself should have a predictable character. When he observes that the various parts of the universe function with absolute harmony, he realizes that, in like manner, he should live in complete harmony with society, without hatred for or malice towards anyone. When he sees the events of the universe always proceeding towards a meaningful result, he realizes that man's life, too, must have a meaningful end. Thus he exclaims: 'O our Lord! You have not created (all) this without purpose. Glory be to You! Give us salvation from the torment of hellfire!' (3.191).

In brief, the universe is a manifestation of the attributes of almighty God. Hence, it is a source of spiritual nourishment for those who want to lead a divine life on earth. For them, the whole universe becomes a great means of their reaching spiritual perfection. This spiritual development continues incessantly throughout their earthly life. As the ultimate result of this life-long developmental process, they attain that degree of spirituality which the Quran calls the *rabbani* (godly) soul. It is such as these who, in the life hereafter, will be told by their most compassionate Lord: 'Dwell in Paradise; you shall have no fear, nor shall you grieve' (7.49).

There is nothing mysterious about spirituality in Islam. It is rather the direct result of the kind of contemplation that results in intellectual development. This takes place when a believer ponders over the Creator and His creation: he gains something in the process that may be termed spirituality. The source, therefore, of Islamic spirituality is perusal and reflection rather than any sort of mysterious exercise.





# ***Some Thoughts on the Contemplative Life***

**Vimala Thakar**

**A** HUMAN being is a multidimensional creature. The human race is eloquent proof of the ever-evolving energy of consciousness operating in the universe. Contemplation is psychological action. It is looking inward in order to grasp the nature of activities going on in the mind-brain complex. A contemplative person can function in society more effectively and competently when he or she has to discharge social responsibilities.

Contemplation induces the urge to explore the dimension of *silence* as well as meditation. It confers a quietness and steadiness in physical movements. It leads to a spontaneous restraint on the activity of verbalization to which we are usually attached. Indians had an inborn tendency for contemplation due to India's agrarian culture. Agriculture gives enough time to the farmer community for relaxing into friendship with nature as well as cooperation with all the non-human species.

We are living in the era of globalized industrialization. We are surrounded by electronic gadgets. Life is getting mechanized and computerized by the day. We are obliged to live at a speed for which the human organism has not been intended. It is necessary to introduce in our educational system methods of relaxation such as raja yoga, along with breathing exercises, right from primary school. It will enable children to grow into a lifestyle that will blend contemplation and physical action into one holistic movement of life.


I inherited contemplative consciousness from my mother's father and my own father. My maternal grandfather was an eminent lawyer living at Raipur in Madhya Pradesh. He had known Swami Vivekananda personally. He would spend a couple of hours in the early morning in meditation. I would sit by his side and watch him. Without

understanding what it meant I started sitting in silence and enjoyed it.

My father was also an eminent lawyer. He was brought up and educated at Ajmer and Jaipur in Rajasthan. He was deeply impressed by Swami Rama Tirtha's philosophy of Advaita. Thus I had drunk the nectar of contemplation and meditation early in childhood. At a young age, I came in contact with Sant Vinoba Bhave and worked in his Bhoodan Movement. Vinobaji was quite a phenomenon—a great scholar! He was a staunch and ardent devotee and a karma yogi. He was the epitome of holistic lifestyle. Contemplation and action were like inhalation and exhalation for him.

By the end of 1956, life brought me in touch with the great world teacher Sri J Krishnamurti. I used to meet him whenever and wherever I got an opportunity to do so. He opened global vistas for me. A synthesis of science and spirituality was manifest in Krishnaji's life and work.

Life brought me to Mt Abu in 1963 and gave me a comfortable residential unit in which to live and work. That is how a long series of national and international youth camps and meditation retreats started.

Now it is the evening of life for me. All activities are discontinued. A quiet joyous preparation is being made to merge into the bliss of Eternity! 

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How can there be so much corruption in the country if there are millions and millions of religious people? We are divided within, we think religion and God is something to get after death and here on this earth we worship money, power, hatred, anger, violence. We have to stop and understand that to be religious is to meet every relationship with the awareness of the presence of the Divine. —Vimala Thakar

# The Contemplative Mind

Prof. Somnath Bhattacharyya

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower;  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.* —William Blake

IT will take, I dare say, lots of contemplative hours and a deep contemplative mood to understand these wonderful lines of Blake, and another half-a-lifetime of contemplation to realize their inner sense, to taste the nectar hidden within them.

### The Contemplative Personality

The verb *contemplate* has both transitive and intransitive uses. As a transitive verb it means ‘to look at thoughtfully, to consider’; as an intransitive verb it means ‘to think about spiritual matters, to think calmly and at length, especially as a religious exercise’. Contemplative is the adjectival form, meaning ‘calm and thoughtful’. As a noun it means ‘a practitioner of spiritual contemplation such as a monk or a nun’.

Thus contemplation needs to be understood from two different angles. First, a person can (and does) contemplate, or consider thoughtfully, various problems. The problem may be a difficult equation of physics, or the bizarre hallucination of a psychotic, or a complex musical score, or such practical things as the best way to prepare the family budget. I shall call them ‘stimulus-determined acts of contemplation’. Contemplating a religious problem should also belong here. But the contemplative mind is not stimulus-dependent; it may be more appropriately termed ‘stimulus-related’. It is an existential state, not a mere orientation of the mind.

The contemplative mind is a ‘personality type’. A person with such a mind is naturally, ‘substantially,’

and inherently contemplative. The opposite of this may be called the fickle type.

The matter is beautifully explained in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. Vyasa, in his commentary on the first aphorism, says that human minds are of five different types: (i) *kṣipta*, (ii) *mūḍha*, (iii) *vikṣipta*, (iv) *ekāgra*, and (v) *niruddha* (*kṣiptam-mūḍham-vikṣiptam-ekāgram-niruddham-ete cittabhūmayah*). The term *bhūmi* used by Vyasa commonly refers to land or territory. But *citta* cannot be space-related. Hence it means an existential state: ‘The different *samādhis*, *bhūmis*, or *guṇasthāna(ka)s* mark the line of advance in spirituality.’<sup>1</sup> The use of this term in compound words like *bhoga-bhūmi* and *karma-bhūmi* further clarifies this shade of meaning: the *bhūmis* are not space-like states but ‘modes of existence’.<sup>2</sup>

In Yoga psychology, the term *citta* is not coterminous with *manas*, mind.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, however, I take *citta* and mind to be the same. Swami Vivekananda takes *citta* to mean ‘mind-stuff’;<sup>4</sup> other authors like James Woods and Haridas Bhattacharyya have also translated *citta* as mind or mind-stuff.<sup>5</sup>

The term *kṣipta* means wild, restless, or naturally distracted; *mūḍha*, ignorant, stupid, or infatuated; *vikṣipta*, unsteady or distracted; and *ekāgra*, one-pointed, attentive, or singular in intent; while *niruddha* refers to restriction or cessation of mental activity, or an intuitive temper.<sup>6</sup>

The contemplative mind is a type of mind—the *ekāgra* mind—that some people possess naturally. When this *ekāgratā* or one-pointedness is well developed, the mind is termed *ekāgrabhūmika*. The *vikṣipta* mind, ‘although prevalently unstable ... is occasionally stable’. This group will be able to concentrate, to contemplate for a while, but will get distracted again. Such people can be trained to im-

prove their power and duration of concentration or contemplation, but the real contemplative power (mind) is seen only in the *ekāgra* type.

According to Yoga, the contemplative mind is an entity that is a given—a quality that is naturally present in some individuals, and a qualitative modification that can be achieved by some people if they try hard enough.

The mind of the spiritual aspirant needs to be steadfastly concentrated. This is an uphill task, which has to be learned and mastered through great effort, and love and respect for the vocation. ‘By great struggle we get a certain power of concentration,’ observes Swami Vivekananda; and again, ‘The greater part of the practical lessons which the Yogi give us is in the mind, the power of concentration and meditation.’<sup>7</sup> The Bhagavadgita (6.35) also emphasizes the same point when it says, ‘It (the mind) can be brought under control through practice and detachment.’ This in fact is the first step of any sadhana, of any spiritual journey. And ‘Raja-Yoga is the science which teaches us how to gain the power of concentration’ (1.157). According to Swami Vivekananda, ‘If the mind can first concentrate upon an object, and then is able to continue in that concentration for a length of time ... [then] everything comes under the control of such a mind’ (1.186). Also, ‘The flow of this continuous control of the mind becomes steady when practised day after day, and the mind obtains the faculty of continuous concentration’ (1.273).

### **Contemplation in Philosophy and Ritual**

Of the six classical philosophies of India, Yoga says that intense concentration is the very essence of sadhana, but none of the other five have undervalued concentration and contemplation. After all, whenever you are interested in anything, you are being contemplative. Attention to objects, that is, perception, also develops into contemplation. Attention to concepts *is* contemplation, and this is the basis of all sadhanas. Even the shastras (the Upanishads, for instance) do not reveal their meanings before the student has spent considerable time

thinking about and pondering over them. The dictionary meaning can be easily deciphered in every published edition, but the spiritual import does not unfold if you just browse through the pages.

Vedanta teachers give us a threefold method of sadhana: *śravaṇa* (learning), *manana* (thinking or deliberation), and *nididhyāsana* or *dhyāna* (entering the subject deeply or contemplation). Learning is not realization. In fact, mere learning does not even give any knowledge; it just gives the learner the ability to parrot. Realization comes after the student ruminates; but realization is still not liberation from pre-existing incorrect knowledge (*samakaras*). For example, we all know that nothing is everlasting (that everything is *kṣaṇika* or transient), but an average person behaves as if he or she believes everything is going to last forever, especially things that are dear to the heart.<sup>8</sup>

The non-Upanishadic philosophies also require the aspirant to sit still and meditate. Siddhartha became the Buddha only after a long and arduous meditation. ‘As he [Buddha] thought deeply into the root of the matter, it occurred to him that decay and death can only occur when there is birth.’ The student of Buddhist discipline is required to concentrate on material things at the beginning of this sadhana and then proceed to finer aspects of dhyana.<sup>9</sup>

The Jaina philosophy also recognizes the importance of meditation: ‘When by meditation, all the karmas are burnt (*dhyānāgnidhagdhakarma*) the self becomes purified,’ and ‘Without the control of the mind no one can proceed in the path of yoga’ (1.201).

The Nyaya-Vaisheshika system recognizes *prātibha-jñāna*—an intuitive perception of future or otherwise imperceptible events obtained directly by the mind through the practice of concentration (1.342–3). As the sadhaka develops his power of concentration, his false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*) about his own self gets corrected. This leads the sadhaka to the state of mukti (1.365–6).

These citations tell us that ‘attention-concentration-contemplation’ is an essential *means* in the sad-

haka's quest. There are others—the Alvars, great devotees of Vishnu, for instance—for whom contemplation is an *end*. The word Alvar means 'one who has a deep intuitive knowledge of God and one who is immersed in the contemplation of Him' (3.68).

The rituals of Hindu worship are replete with dhyana and contemplation. Starting from the very first puja ritual, the *ācamana*—where the worshipper moistens his or her throat by sipping three half-spoonfuls of water—the successive stages of worship involve more contemplation than action. The ritual of *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā* (endowing the image with life-force) involves the highest contemplation. Another important component of puja is the *mānasa-pūja*, in which the worshipper makes all the necessary offerings in thought alone without the help of external *upacāras* (offerings). In image worship the most important component is meditation, dhyana. The worshipper meditates on the qualities of the deity in the image while chanting the description of the deity as given in the shastras. Then, in deep contemplation, the worshipper identifies him- or herself with the Deity. In the concluding ritual of *homa*, the ritual fire (*homāgni*) is identified with the Deity and both of them with the worshipper's own self. All these are done in a deeply contemplative spirit.

### The Psychology of Contemplation

Let us take a look at some psychological factors, especially attention. Contemplation is deep attention. In the early days of experimental psychology, attention was an important subject matter for study.<sup>10</sup> In the twenty-first century, attention is still as important a subject of study as ever. Without the ability to attend to the external world, humanity will not survive. Without the ability to attend to the internal world, humanity will not be able to create philosophy or mathematics. In reality, the human capacity for *apperception* is the same as the human capacity for *contemplation*.

The first-generation experimental psychologists—Wundt, Edward Titchener, and others—studied attention through introspection and close contemplation. Titchener classified attention into

three types: primary, secondary, and derived primary or secondarily primary. He outlined nine determinants of primary attention: (i) very strong stimulus (a thunderclap, the smell of musk, and the like); (ii) moving stimulus (a bug sitting on the bedcover may not be visible, but a moving bug is); (iii) a stimulus that persists (for a significant duration); (iv) a vivid stimulus; and so on. This type of attention has obvious survival value. And nature has so made us that these stimuli take our attention mainly 'by force'. Here, there is no place for contemplation. But the study of, say, geometry, is not attractive to the beginner, and does not draw one's attention spontaneously. The student has to discipline his mind to set it on the geometry lesson. Here the student toils, studies for a period, becomes distracted, forces himself to study again, and this process keeps repeating. This is *secondary attention*. There is no place for contemplation here either. The very essence of contemplation is a pleasant, soothing feeling; the very essence of secondary attention is an unpleasant feeling of dry hard labour. But when this beginner matures and grows into a mathematician, or a scientist, his geometry becomes his love. This is *derived primary attention*. The mathematician now lives geometry, loves geometry, talks geometry, and dreams geometry. He enjoys deeply his contemplation on problems of geometry.

Contemplation is not merely a matter of attention; it is a matter of *discriminative attention*.<sup>11</sup> Discrimination entails a specific component of personality: interest or aptitude.<sup>12</sup> An individual cannot think calmly and at length on a subject that does not attract him or her. But one can contemplate with equal earnestness percepts (things that are physically present) or concepts, if they are found interesting. Successful contemplation is also dependent on available situational factors. After all, not every teaching institution provides opportunities for the study of all possible subjects.

As mentioned earlier, the contemplative mind is not just a mental set, but a personality type. The *cittabhūmis* of Yoga are also types of personality.<sup>13</sup> Carl G Jung, the famous typologist, says that there

are eight types of people in this world. This classification distinguishes between two attitudes and four mental functions. The two attitudes are introversion and extroversion.

The extraverted attitude orients the person toward the external objective world; the introverted attitude orients the person toward the inner, subjective world. ...

... there are four fundamental psychological functions: *thinking, feeling, sensing* and *intuiting*. ... By thinking, humans try to comprehend the nature of the world and themselves. Feeling ... is the value of things, whether positive or negative. ... The feeling function gives humans their subjective experiences of pleasure and pain, of anger, fear, sorrow, joy, and love. Sensing is the perceptual or reality function. ... The intuitive person goes beyond facts, feelings, and ideas in his or her search for the essence of reality.<sup>14</sup>

It is to be understood that each and every 'type'

is capable of developing a contemplative mind in his or her area of personality. The introverted intuitive type, however, will readily go for spiritual subjects. And to echo a dictum of raja yoga, substantive contemplation is available only to some people, to some types of persons alone.

### **Learning to Contemplate**

A common and pertinent question is whether contemplation can be taught. The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. No because nothing can be 'taught', as Sri Aurobindo tells us, unless the pupil wants to learn. But how could people want to learn something if they are ignorant about the object? Thousands of people roam the face of the earth who have never wanted to learn about Vedanta or quantum mechanics. They have not even heard about these subjects. But contemplation is different. Contemplation is not a subject 'out there'. It is a mode of being,

**A fascinating study** of perception examined the Rorschach test responses of Buddhist meditators ranging from the beginners to enlightened masters. Beginners showed normal response patterns, whereas subjects with greater concentration saw not the usual images, such as animals and people, but simply the pattern of light and dark on the Rorschach cards. That is, their minds showed little tendency to elaborate these patterns into organized images, a finding consistent with the claim that concentration focuses the mind and reduces the number of associations.

Further striking findings characterized subjects who had ... reached the first of the four classic stages of Buddhist enlightenment ... these subjects viewed the images they saw as creations of their own minds and were aware of the moment-by-moment process by which their stream of consciousness became organized into images.

Interestingly, the initially enlightened subjects displayed evidence of normal conflicts around issues such as dependency, sexuality, and aggression. However,

### **What do you see?**

*In a Rorschach test, a standard set of symmetrical ink blots of different shapes and colours is presented one by one to the subject, who is asked to describe what they suggest or resemble.*

they showed remarkably little defensiveness and reactivity to these conflicts. In other words, they accepted and were unperturbed by their neuroses.

Those few meditators at the third stage of enlightenment gave reports that were unique in four ways. First, these meditation masters saw not only images but the ink blot itself as a projection of mind. Second, they showed no evidence of drive conflicts and appeared free of psychological conflicts usually considered an inescapable part of human existence. This finding is consistent with classic claims that psychological suffering can be dramatically reduced in advanced stages of meditation.

The third and fourth unique features were that these masters systematically linked their responses to all ten cards into an integrated response on a single theme. The result was a systematic teaching about the nature of human suffering and its alleviation. In other words, the meditation masters transformed the Rorschach testing into a teaching for the testers.


—*Paths Beyond Ego* (1993), 61–2.

a mode of existence. The contemplative mind is a rarity, but passing flickers of concentration (which are precursors to real contemplation) are known to every human being. Each of us knows—even though the experience is momentary—the bliss the mind can generate in a non-fleeing state.

The yogi is the fittest teacher of mind control. Maharshi Patanjali has listed eight *anigas* (limbs) of the psycho-physical training that leads to samadhi, the highest state of concentration or contemplation. These include re-education of the sensory-motor system, including mastery over desires—the natural mental propensities—and retraining of breathing style (through pranayama).<sup>15</sup>

The psychotherapist's task and training also include calming and pacifying the body and the complex-torn dishevelled mind, and finally generating insight. The details of yogic discipline or of psychotherapeutic practice are beyond the scope of this article, but I would like to mention an interesting relationship between the state of mind and respiration that has been observed by experimental psychologists. Respiration has six measures: (i) inspiration (inhalation) time (I); (ii) expiration (exhalation) time (E); (iii) rate (the number of complete respiratory cycles in a minute; one complete cycle is given by:  $I + E = C$ ); (iv) depth; (v) I/E ratio; and (vi) I/C. In normal respiration, E is somewhat bigger than I. If a person inhales through, say, 1.5 seconds and exhales through 2.5 seconds, then C will be 4 seconds and the respiratory rate 15 cycles per minute. (This however, is not literally true, because every respiratory cycle involves short pauses after inhalation and exhalation.) Of these six measures, the I/C ratio (known as the I fraction) is 'a simpler and more intelligible measure'. However, the I/E ratio 'is low in attentive mental work ... and the greater the reported feeling of "tense" attention, the lower the ratio'.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, deeper and longer inspiration results in higher I/E ratio. This is characteristic of relaxed attention, a necessary prelude to contemplation. In fact, deep inspiration is used as a technique for inducing relaxation.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, how far and to what extent is the practice

of attention (especially the secondary type) necessary, beneficial, and productive for the individual? The answer is simple: nothing could have been achieved without concentration-contemplation. Although 'man stands alone', Homo sapiens has survived in this raw world because of its contemplative abilities. The human skin is extremely delicate and fragile, largely worthless for survival in a tsunami-ridden, rapidly warming, essentially unpredictable, and erratic environment. But it is the human skin that has survived and proliferated; the rhino is now an endangered species. And all this because humans—at least some—can contemplate. 

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2. Haridas Bhattacharyya, 'Indian Ethics', in *The Philosophies*, 637.
3. In Indian philosophic writings we come across the term *antaḥkaraṇa*. *Karaṇa* means instrument. There are ten *bāhyakaraṇas* (external organs/instruments: the five sense-capacities and the five action-capacities), and three *antaḥkaraṇas* (internal organs: intellect, egoity, mind). In Yoga, 'intellect, egoity and mind are brought together into a single all-pervasive cognitive faculty called awareness (*citta*).' 'The reduction of the functions of *buddhi*, *ahamkāra*, and *manas* to *ekatva*, or oneness, appears to correlate with Yoga's emphasis on the notion of *citta*.' See Gerald J Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 27, 146. In Vedanta, however, *citta* is considered the fourth mode of *antaḥkaraṇa*, responsible for memory. Some commentators consider it a part of *buddhi*. See Swami Nikhilananda, *Vedantasara of Sadananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1968), 48–50.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.94, 175.
5. See James Houghton Woods, *The Yoga System of Patanjali* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 3; and Ref. 1.
6. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 1.268.

7. *Complete Works*, 1.510, 517.
8. I have used the term *liberation* not in the sense of moksha, but in the sense of getting rid of a pre-existing (wrong) idea. In psychotherapy, I have seen that when a client is given advice, say about a cognitive modification, he has understood not the meaning but only the words spoken, even though he has apparently listened attentively to the plan and says that he has understood it. The client could have memorized the total conversation, but that is all that he has achieved. It does not affect the 'complex' for which he has come to therapy. After a few more sessions, and much 'homework', the client becomes convinced that some of his ideas are not logical, or are not feasible. Even then he is unable to shake off these ideas. This is realization, but is still not liberation. A deeper realization is necessary for liberation. The boxed illustration on the right will make the point clear.
9. *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 1.84, 104–105.
10. Wilhem Max Wundt (1832–1920) 'is considered by many to be the father of experimental psychology. ... [He] held a chair in philosophy at the University of Leipzig, where he established the first laboratory for psychological studies. He believed that the missing component in deterministic accounts of behaviour was the human capacity for apperception—a term traceable to Gottfried Leibniz and Immanuel Kant—which described the synthetic, creative response of the human mind to the environment. The mind, Wundt argued, could produce responses that were not a direct or predictable result of external stimuli.' *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Oxford, 2002), 517.
11. 'Discriminative Learning and Attention' is an important component of experimental psychology. Almost every book on experimental psychology discusses this topic. M R D'Amato's *Methodology, Psychophysics and Learning* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill, 1999) is a good study for students. R S Woodworth and H Schlosberg's *Experimental Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1954) is a classic in the field.
12. In sadhana also, the guru judges the disciple's personality (*bhūmi*, *yogyatā*, and *samskara*) before initiation. A particular disciple may not be capable of a specific sadhana chosen randomly, arbitrarily, or whimsically. There is an interesting discussion on the qualifications required for study of the *Brahma Sutra* in Acharya Shankara's commentary on the text. This treatise can be profitably studied only by students who already have certain personality traits well developed and fixed

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**A patient M.** came to me for his cockroach phobia. He carefully looked around my office to make sure there were no cockroaches and only then took a seat. I noticed that it was difficult for him even to speak about his phobia. Gradually, after some days of discussion, he was at last able to speak freely about cockroaches, and then to look at a cockroach. But when I told him to bring some cockroaches in a closed glass jar, he became very agitated. By this time he was able to imagine cockroaches moving about as well as their morphic features. After a good bit of time he was actually able to bring some cockroaches in a small glass jar to my office. Holding the jar triumphantly, he announced, 'Look, I have conquered my cockroach fear. I have now *realized* that these are *normal helpless insects* ...' After a few days of jar-holding I told him to open his shirt-buttons and place the jar on his chest. But M. was unable to do that! He had *realized* that cockroaches are not dangerous, but he was yet to be *liberated* from his phobia.

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in their natures. These traits include: (i) The student's confirmed ability to distinguish and discriminate between what is 'real' and what is 'illusory' (*nityānitya-vastu-viveka*), and (ii) disinterest in the enjoyment of pleasures of body and mind that are available here in this world or later in heaven (*ihāmūtra-phalabhoga-virāga*).

13. Personality in psychology is a complicated subject. There are many theories of personality. Some describe it as a cluster of 'traits', some as multiple 'types'. A readable book is Calvin S Hall, Gardner Lindzey, and John B Campbell, *Theories of Personality* (John Wiley, 1998).
14. *Theories of Personality*, 91–2.
15. Any one can read with profit about *aṣṭāṅga sādhanā*, the eight limbs of practice, in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Please begin at sutra 28 of the second chapter and proceed. Maharshi's breath-training lessons start at sutra 2.49.
16. R S Woodworth, *Experimental Psychology* (Columbia, 1938), 262–3.
17. Pranayama involves controlled breathing to induce a contemplative frame of mind. The *sandhyā-vandanā kriyā* (the daily ritual meditation prescribed by the Vedas) includes a pranayama wherein I and E are made equal. This is known as *vaidika prāṇāyāma*.



# ***The Neurophysiological and Psychoneural Aspects of Meditative Practices***

**Dr S Sulekha, Dr P N Ravindra, Dr T R Raju, and Dr Bindu Kutty**

**S**INCE the dawn of the human intellect, questions have been raised about the possible means to attain the highest states of human consciousness. Yoga is an ancient Indian science and a way of life that has been practised over thousands of years to achieve functional harmony between body and mind. It is a way to self-perfection and unveiling of the human potential.

Various meditation techniques are now popular as ideal methods of controlling the mind and thereby attaining psychophysical harmony. Meditation is a state of mental absorption, which can be attained either by concentration or by mindfulness. Most meditative techniques fall under these two broad categories. Mindfulness practices like Zen and Vipassana meditation allow the mind to be passively aware—without judgment or analysis—of thoughts crossing it, like a witness or an observer. Concentrative meditation techniques (like yogic meditation and Transcendental Meditation or TM) involve focusing on a specific image, on the breath, or on a repeated sound. In kundalini meditation, practitioners experience the awakened kundalini energy by concentrating the mind on the bodily chakras along with the repetition of a sacred mystical mantra. Meditation could be of great value through its capacity to awaken altered states of consciousness that may profoundly reorient individual identity, emotional attitude, sense of well-being, and purpose in life.<sup>1</sup>

Tremendous changes are observed in the human brain following the use of meditative techniques or yoga practices. With the advancement in both conceptual and methodological approaches, we are in a better position to understand the neurophysiological correlates of meditation. The ba-

sic approach in understanding brain responses to meditative practice rests on the fact that ‘different conscious states and experiences are accompanied by activity of specific regions of the brain’. Meditation practice induces distinct *states* and *traits* of consciousness. *State* refers to the conscious experiences during meditation, whereas the term *trait* implies the persistent mental disposition of the meditator irrespective of whether or not he or she is actively involved in meditation at a given time.<sup>2</sup> Growing evidence suggests that the regular practice of meditation results in long-lasting trait changes: deepened sense of relaxation, increased sense of comfort, heightened awareness of oneself and the surroundings, and a sense of universal being.

### ***Meditation and Brain Electrical Activity***

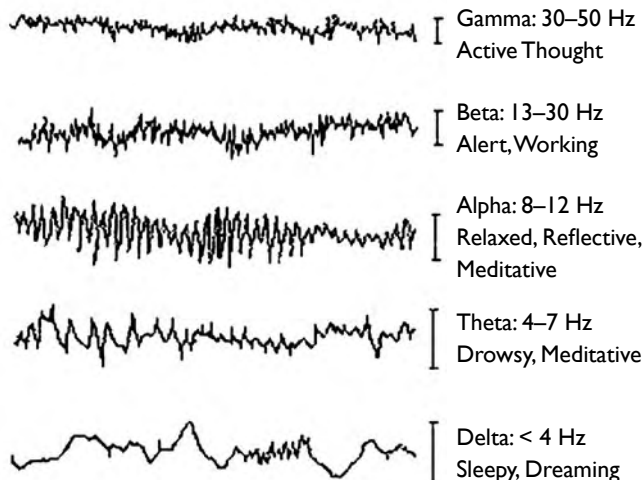
One of the early methods used to understand brain changes during and after meditation is by recording the electrical activity of the brain by means of electroencephalograms (EEG). Electrical waves in the brain have different frequencies (termed alpha, beta, theta, and the like) which are specific to different mental states. EEG parameters like synchrony, frequency spectrum, amplitude, and coherence reflect important aspects of cortical information processing.

During meditation, alpha-wave amplitude is known to increase, and this can persist as a trait. Greater alpha activity has been found to correlate with lower levels of anxiety, a feeling of calm, and a positive affect. This increase in alpha power has also been recorded in patients suffering from epilepsy who practised meditation as one of their therapeutic interventions. Some of the concentra-

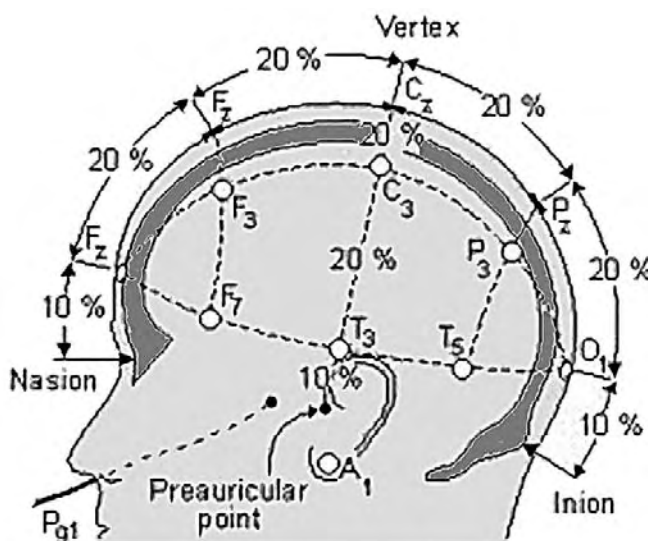


tive meditative practices have been shown to increase theta activity in the forebrain (the front portion of the brain). Individuals having high theta activity have been shown to be less anxious. Some studies showed a correlation between increased theta activity and proficiency in meditative techniques. Yogic practitioners showed increased alpha-theta coherence between both intra- and inter-hemispherical recording sites. This coherence of alpha-theta power was observed both as a state and as a trait.

It is evident that meditative states can influence EEG measures, but how exactly they affect cognitive performance and alter the central nervous system to induce specific traits is not yet clear. A growing body of research, however, supports the notion that yogic practices reduce stress-induced deleterious effects on both physiological and psychological functioning. Regular meditative practices can bring about functional plasticity in the central nervous system resulting in positive clinical relief from anxiety, pain, depression, and stress-related disorders. A pioneering study carried out in our laboratory at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurological Sciences (NIMHANS) involving various meditation practices—Transcendental Meditation (TM), Brahmakumari's Raja Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Pranava Mantra Meditation, Siddha Samadhi Yoga, and Benedictine Christian Contemplation—showed that meditation induces electrical synchrony between the two lobes of the brain and improves the bodily response to stressful situations as measured through such autonomic parameters as heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and galvanic skin-resistance. The changes were not uniform across various groups of meditators, but differed according to the nature of the individual and the environment in which they practised.<sup>3</sup>



*Various types of EEG brain-waves and their behavioural correlates.*

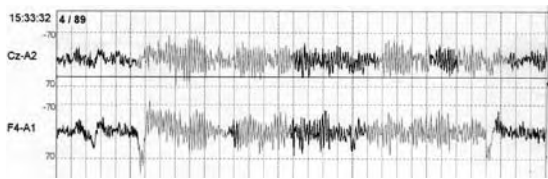


*The conventional 10-20 system of recording EEG, Jasper, 1958*

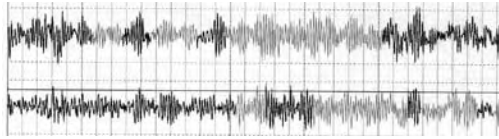
## **Other Electrical and Imaging Studies**

In addition to EEG studies, other parameters such as evoked potentials and event-related potentials (ERP, as p300) have been utilized to elucidate the efficiency of the brain in processing information during meditation. Meditation practices are known to reduce the latency and amplitude of the visual evoked potentials, indicating enhanced perceptual acuity.

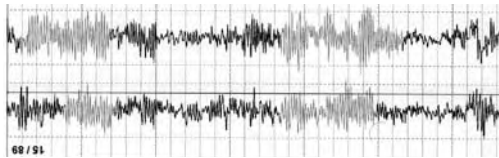
Recent advancement in brain mapping techniques (PET, MRI, fMRI, and SPECT) provides in-



Eyes open



Eyes closed



Meditation

EEG of a senior meditator showing high amplitude alpha pre-dominance (relaxed state) in all three stages (eyes open, eyes closed, and during meditation). In non-meditators alpha pre-dominance is seen only during the eyes-closed relaxed state. This demonstrates that meditators maintain the relaxed state irrespective of their behavioural situation.

sight in understanding changes in brain functioning associated with meditation. Such techniques have revealed the complex sensory representation

in the physical structure of the brain and the correlates of cognitive functioning at the neuronal network level. These neuroimaging studies have demonstrated the activation of the frontal and pre-frontal areas of the brain during meditative practice. Enhanced cerebral blood flow in the inferior and orbitofrontal cortex, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and thalamus has been identified as a measure of focused concentration, and decreased blood flow in areas like the left superior parietal lobe and left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex as a measure of the altered sense of space experienced during meditation.<sup>4</sup> Overall, it appears that meditation practices activate the neural structures involved in attention and concentration.

### Meditation and States of Consciousness

Various states of consciousness—waking (*jagrat*), sleep (*svapna*), deep sleep (*sushupti*), and transcendence of empirical consciousness (*turiya*) have been described in ancient Indian texts. Most empirical studies have been confined to studying the effects of meditation practices on the waking state. There are very few studies on the other stages. The Department of Neurophysiology, NIMHANS, is one

**Meditators, compared to nonmeditators**, have been found to be significantly less anxious, report fewer psychosomatic disorders, more positive moods, and are less neurotic on Eysenck's scale. Meditators also show an increased independence of situational cues, that is, [they have an] internal locus of control; are more spontaneous, have greater capacity for intimate contact, are more accepting of self, and have higher self-regard; are better at empathizing with another person; and show less fear of death.

—*Theories of Personality* (1978), 375.

**Yogis and Zen practitioners** may respond differently to sensory stimulation, in ways consistent with their respective methods and goals of practice. Yogis, whose practice involves focus and withdrawal of attention from the senses, showed little EEG response

to repeated noises. Zen monks, however, whose practice involves open receptivity to all stimuli, showed continued EEG responsiveness to a repeated sound, rather than habituating to it as nonmeditators would.

—*Paths Beyond Ego* (1993), 64.


**Meditation is difficult to evaluate** physiologically, much more so than you might suppose. ... Several artefacts are implicit in studying meditation in a laboratory setting. Indeed, anyone who consents to be a subject for an experiment changes even before the electrodes, tubes, or other connections are attached. ... Not surprisingly, when Pekala recently reviewed the phenomenology of meditation he found that none of the twenty-eight studies was adequate methodologically. None fulfilled the key criteria of reliability, validity, and comprehensiveness.—*Zen and the Brain* (1999), 80.

of those few groups trying to understand the brain mechanism of meditation and its effect on sleep patterns. Polysomnographic (sleep recording) studies carried out in our laboratory have shown distinct changes in sleep structure in senior practitioners of yoga and meditation. Intense practice of yoga helps retain slow-wave sleep (deep sleep) while enhancing REM (dream) sleep. Slow-wave sleep undergoes an age related decline, and yoga practices help retain a younger biological age as far as sleep is concerned.<sup>5</sup> REM sleep has been correlated with learning, memory, and other cognitive functions. Our study thus reflects the possibility of enhancing REM sleep states and thereby enhancing cognitive abilities even in middle age and thereafter. An earlier study compared the sleep in TM practitioners with controls and reported higher levels of alpha activity in meditators during deep-sleep stages. Long term TM practitioners who reported maintaining witnessing awareness throughout their sleep cycles exhibited high theta and low alpha activity during deep sleep states when compared to controls. These findings suggest the possible existence of transcendental consciousness during waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.<sup>6</sup>

### **Meditation and Biochemical Changes**

Meditation practices are accompanied by various biochemical changes too. These biochemical changes are specific to the mental or behavioural states and traits of the person concerned. Long-term meditation has been shown to be associated with reduced blood lactate levels (which facilitates better oxygen delivery to the tissues), decrease in cortisol levels (which suggests lessened activity of the hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal axis, and therefore a reduction in stress), decreased cholesterol levels, and increase in High-density Lipoproteins (HDL, which protects against heart disease).<sup>7</sup> Meditation is also known to improve general physiological function, sleep, and biological rhythms by increasing dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), melatonin, prolactin, and growth hormone levels in blood. Immunological parameters like levels of cy-

tokines and interleukins, which play an important role in the body's defence mechanism, are known to improve following meditation. Thus proficient practice of meditation increases immunity and can be an important aid in lifestyle management in terminally ill cancer patients.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, yoga practices, in general, bring about overall physiological and biochemical changes leading to enhanced physical health and mental performance, delayed aging process, and an enhanced feeling of well-being. Nevertheless, such states of well-being and subjective ecstatic experiences need not be associated with any of these objective measurements and can be viewed as purely psychological processes. 

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## THE SCIENTIFIC VIEWPOINT

# *The Contemplative Life and Psychopathology*

Dr Alan Roland

### *Historical Background*

THE most important early work on this theme was by an American psychologist: William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).<sup>1</sup> James had first met Swami Vivekananda probably in 1894 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in 1896 spent considerable time with him in Cambridge and Boston. In the psychoanalytic field, as distinguished from psychology, the subject of spiritual experiences and psychopathology started in an important dialogue between Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland, the French mystic and humanist, who wrote a biography of Ramakrishna (published 1928).<sup>2</sup> Both were great admirers of each other, and both decried the inhumanity of World War I where millions were killed and wounded. After Freud published *The Future of an Illusion* (1927),<sup>3</sup> Rolland wrote to him that he agreed in the main with Freud's analysis that religion and God for most people usually serve the purpose of protection against the vicissitudes of life, and particularly against the vulnerability of childhood anxieties. Rolland, however, then asserted that the real essence of religion was spiritual experience, or the 'oceanic feeling', and asked Freud to comment on this. Freud, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930),<sup>4</sup> responded that he, himself, had never had such experiences but speculated that they might be related to the egoless state of infancy when the child is merged with the mother.

Since that date until very recent years, Freudian psychoanalysts with but few exceptions viewed spiritual experiences as either regression to the egoless state of infancy or some kind of psychopathology. This pervasive, reductionistic viewpoint was carried to the extreme by Jeffrey Masson, a well-

regarded Sanskrit scholar who became a psychoanalyst. Masson, endowed with a greater intellectual armamentarium than most analysts, found a multiplicity of psychopathology in Ramakrishna and other spiritual figures.<sup>5</sup> This Freudian view was so pervasive that Marion Milner, an English psychoanalyst, delayed publishing her paper on meditation for fourteen years.<sup>6</sup> Nina Coltart, another English psychoanalyst who was deeply involved in Vipassana Buddhist meditation for a number of years, published two papers on meditation and psychoanalysis, but refused to talk about the subject before a psychoanalytic audience.<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Bion, a third English analyst, grew up in India, and formulated the spiritual as 'O', but its deeper connection to Vedanta philosophy is not readily evident.<sup>8</sup> Even by 1994, when a break-through meeting on 'The Suffering Self: A Dialogue Between Psychoanalysts and Buddhists' was held before a large audience in New York City, some major Freudian psychoanalysts personally involved in meditation were highly reluctant to participate for fear of their professional reputation.

However, the psychoanalytic field has never been monolithic. Jung and his followers have always been interested in spiritual exploration to one degree or another. Then, in the late 1940s, through training Japanese psychiatrist Akihisa Kondo, who was involved in Zen Buddhist practices, Karen Horney and Erich Fromm, two of the most important neo-Freudian psychoanalysts, became involved in Zen Buddhism with D T Suzuki, a Zen teacher at Columbia University.<sup>9</sup> To what extent they were involved in the teachings of Zen, and to what extent they became involved in Zen medita-

tive practice is unclear. Karen Horney Institute psychoanalysts from the 1940s on were also involved with Martin Buber and Hasidism, or Jewish mysticism, while Harold Kelman and David Shainberg of that group explored Eastern thought and practices, the latter with Krishnamurti.

While the Freudian field until very recent years remained on the whole ensconced in its reductionistic views of spiritual experiences, Sudhir Kakar, a student of Erik Erikson, challenged this viewpoint in his initial book in a chapter on Swami Vivekananda.<sup>10</sup> Erikson himself was an exception to the Freudian psychoanalytic viewpoint in what was on the whole a sympathetic portrait of Mahatma Gandhi. Kakar later went on to write about Gandhi and then Ramakrishna.<sup>11</sup> Kakar, on one hand, asserted that mystics such as Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Ramakrishna are legitimate spiritual figures whose experiences could not be reduced to psychopathology or regression to infantile states of mind, thus critiquing Freudian psychoanalytic reductionism. In his background description of these spiritual figures, Kakar has written comprehensively, especially for the Western reader. On the other hand, whenever Kakar actually applied psychoanalysis to them, their experiences and motivation were seen as psychopathological and thus fit right into the reductionistic Freudian discourse. Moreover, Kakar eventually held to

*Reflections*



*Sacred Grove*

Freud's assumption that spiritual experiences are related to the undifferentiated mental state of infancy, but gave it a positive spin based on the work of D W Winnicott. I have discussed this at length elsewhere, giving several examples.<sup>12</sup>

Kakar's work has been influential on other persons working in this vein, such as Jeffrey Kripal and William Parsons.<sup>13</sup> Kripal, who has drawn the most attention with his highly controversial book on Ramakrishna, asserts that Ramakrishna is a legitimate spiritual figure but that his spiritual experiences were mainly motivated and coloured by strong latent homosexuality. The latent Freudian reductionistic discourse rears its head once again.

The problem with Kakar's and Kripal's work, as well as Masson's from the past, is that it is applied psychoanalysis, where texts, rather than actual clinical encounters with people, are mainly used for analysis. While some excellent insights have emerged from applied psychoanalysis, particularly in literature, it is a highly speculative venture at

best, where consistency of analysis does not necessarily add up to validity. Speculative hypotheses easily become certitude, especially in the hands of Kakar, Kripal, and Masson. Unfortunately, these authors have all followed a heritage of reductionistic Freudian thinking in applied psychoanalysis that had previously taken place mainly in literary analysis.

In the last two decades or so, a newer discourse on the spiritual seeker and the contemplative life has emerged among Freudian-oriented psychoanalysts. In the United States and England, a small but in-

creasing number of psychoanalysts have become involved in one or another spiritual discipline, mainly with Buddhist schools such as Zen, Vipassana, or Tibetan, but also with Hindu gurus and even occasionally a Sufi pir. Moreover, an increasing number of patients in psychoanalytic therapy are involved in various spiritual practices. Several Freudian psychoanalysts have emerged over the last two decades who have written on this subject from their own experiences and experiences with patients.<sup>14</sup> This more experiential and clinical approach is considerably different from the older one of applied psychoanalysis. In this regard, the atmosphere in the Freudian psychoanalytic world has changed considerably in the United States, especially over the last two decades.

### ***The Spiritual Seeker and Psychopathology***

It is assumed that no matter how spiritually advanced a person might be, there will be various physical illnesses that will occur, and eventually, of course, the body dies. In an analogous way, all of us have come from a particular family, although family relationships and expectations may vary considerably across cultures and even within a culture. Not infrequently, there are idiosyncratic, problematic family relationships that are experienced from childhood on and leave an emotional mark, which can generate inner emotional conflicts or deficits. Some of these conflicts can exist on quite an unconscious level. Thus, it should not be considered unusual that people, including spiritual aspirants or advanced practitioners, might have emotional conflicts within themselves. People usually live with them, sometimes reasonably well, sometimes inflicting their emotional problems on others as well as themselves.

In my work with patients and others, I have observed that the way in which emotional problems interact with the life of a spiritual seeker is a complex matter. As I mentioned above, writers such as Kakar, Kripal, and Masson have attributed psychopathology either to actual spiritual experiences or to the motivations of major spiritual figures, all of

which comes from the speculation of applied psychoanalysis. Much of it seems highly reductionistic if not downright inaccurate. The only exception I would cite is the rare spiritual seeker who may be genuinely inclined in this direction but is also psychotic. Here, a psychotic hallucination or delusion may be confused with a spiritual experience.

From my observations in psychoanalytic therapy, I find that the main ways that emotional problems manifest themselves in those seriously involved in spiritual practices are through their relationships with others or in feelings about themselves. This can be in love relationships, at work, and in social relationships in general. For those who live in a religious community, it is through their relationships with others in the community, including the guru or spiritual leader, that emotional problems manifest. Emotional problems can also seriously interfere with a person's spiritual practices. It is further evident that involvement in the contemplative life is on a different continuum than mental health and psychopathology, but that the two continua can interact in complex ways. Thus, one may be spiritually advanced and mentally healthy, or spiritually advanced but have significant emotional conflicts. One can also be mentally healthy but not be the least bit interested in a spiritual quest; or one might have significant emotional problems and also not be interested in any spiritual search. I should like to give some very brief examples of the complex interaction of the two continua.

Shakuntala, by her twenties, was deeply involved in meditation and other spiritual practices, including having some profound spiritual experiences. As I detailed in her case study, because of her emotional problems, she was unable to meditate in a regular, disciplined way. In addition, her love affair was coloured in various ways by unconscious problems generated by problematic familial relationships when she was a child, particularly with a depressed mother. In her case, psychoanalytic therapy helped her not only with her relationships, but also to become much more disciplined in her spiritual practices.<sup>15</sup>

In another case, an American man, George, was a serious Zen meditation practitioner. Although married, he lived a very emotionally isolated life.



*Soloing*

On the one hand, his Zen practice seemed authentic. On the other hand, it was also clear that he was unconsciously using it to maintain his isolation. A long-term psychoanalysis enabled him to work through difficult issues with a psychotic mother and rigid father so that he became far more socially and emotionally related. His meditative practice continued and deepened as it was not being unconsciously used for defensive purposes any more.

Still another example is an American Catholic nun, Margaret, whose order is very advanced in its thinking in referring some of its members for psychoanalytic therapy. Margaret is a highly intelligent and competent person who seemed genuinely involved in the contemplative life, but her antagonistic relationships with the other nuns had so deteriorated that she was completely marginalized. It gradually became evident that while the other nuns had significant emotional problems of their own, Margaret unconsciously contributed a great deal to the battles and impasse between them. In the therapy, one of the first things that had to be addressed was a biochemical depression, which had previously resulted in a serious suicide attempt and had to be treated with suitable medication by a psychiatrist. Her emotional problems related to her being an unwanted, change-of-life baby of a mother who came from an upper class, socially prominent family. Her problems were also importantly related to an older sister who treated her quite sadistically, this relationship being unconsciously repeated with some of the nuns. As these emotional issues

were gradually worked out in twice-a-week psychoanalytic therapy over five years, her relationships with the other nuns improved dramatically. She was appointed to a position of considerable authority and responsibility, and by her report, her contemplative life became strengthened. Her pilgrimage trips became increasingly well attended.

A more unfortunate example is that of a woman, Jennifer, who gave up a good academic career to become a full-time member of an Indian ashrama in the United States. Apparently, the meditation practice given to her by her guru stirred up a latent psychotic core. She began having dreams and experiencing voices of her guru that directed her to do things that were diametrically opposite to all the rules of the ashrama. She was eventually asked to leave the ashrama and seek psychiatric help, but by that time, the hallucinations and delusions of the psychosis were so florid that she avoided all assistance.

In another complex interaction of the contemplative life and psychopathology, Margaret, an English woman from a conventional Protestant family, was drawn to an Indian guru well known for both his spirituality and sexual licentiousness in his ashrama. Her experience with the guru and in the ashrama helped her considerably in her meditative practices. Simultaneously, she was also subject to sexual abuse by other members of the ashrama, which unconsciously repeated earlier childhood



*Portuguese Church*

*Alan Roland*



sexual abuse.

In the United States, there have been well-documented instances at Buddhist monasteries and Indian ashramas of leaders evidencing clear emotional disturbance, ranging from their own alcoholism and drug abuse to sexually seducing disciples to absconding with monies of the community. This is not to detract from the many other communities where this has not happened. It may well be that where social mores are looser than in Asian countries, such as in the United States, this is more likely to happen. Sexual abuse of parishioners by the Catholic clergy has also been much in the news.

In my own clinical experience, I had one such leader, a well-respected American Sufi meditation teacher, Robert. Unlike the subjects of the previous cases, he did not inflict any of his own problems on others. But he did have to deal with a highly problematic marital relationship and then with a second relationship after his divorce. Unconscious issues from his childhood and adolescence played a major role in his problematic love relationships. Yet, the spiritual side of him continued to develop, especially after a Haj to Mecca.

### ***Spiritual Practices and Emotional Problems***

To what extent do meditation, prayer, or other spiritual practices help aspirants deal with their emotional problems, whether in a religious community or in everyday life? Some believe that if aspirants are sufficiently devoted to their spiritual discipline, they can somehow overcome or resolve any emotional problem. From the observations of Coltart, Rubin, and myself, this does not seem to be the case.<sup>16</sup> While it is well-founded that meditation, prayer, and other practices generally produce a greater calmness and centredness, and can foster a greater awareness of oneself, they cannot resolve intense emotional conflicts or deficits, which are usually rooted in uncon-

scious processes. It is evident that in the various cases I have cited above, deep-seated emotional problems were resolved only in therapy. And in the case where psychosis was present, the person had to be asked to leave the ashrama, as she was becoming disruptive. Coltart remarks from her observations in England that some of the persons who are drawn to Vipassana meditation are looking for a solution to their emotional conflicts, which would be better addressed by therapy. She further concludes that a strong self is optimally needed for full engagement in meditation. Case material, cited above, confirms that as emotional conflicts become resolved, the person's spiritual practices become stronger.

Originally, Wilber wrote that those persons who are drawn to spiritual practices but have significant emotional problems should go into psychotherapy first, and then when they have a stronger sense of self, begin their spiritual disciplines.<sup>17</sup> Cooper (1999), Rubin (1996), and Roland (1999) see the two going more hand in hand.<sup>18</sup> Psychotherapy enables persons to be more involved in their practices as emotional conflicts become resolved, while simultaneously, those involved in spiritual practices are able to withstand better the anxieties that are evoked in psychotherapeutic explorations. Wilber apparently later agreed with this latter viewpoint.

An analogy to physical illness is again apt. If a spiritual practitioner has an infection or a broken bone, he or she will usually want to consult a physician. By the same token, if there are considerable emotional problems that seem to have a life of their own and that interfere significantly with relationships, sense of self, and meditative practices, then one would want to seriously consider seeing a psychotherapist. For many decades, the psychological world and those committed to a contemplative life looked askance



***Jazz Drummer***





*Zen Temple Garden*

at one another. But this is beginning to change in many parts of the world. At one well-respected Indian ashrama in the United States, the swami sent an Indian woman renunciate to a psychotherapist. By report, her relationships in the ashrama improved, and her spiritual practices also benefited. As Shakuntala once stated in session, 'Dr. Roland, meditation is better than psychoanalysis, but best of all is meditation and psychoanalysis.'

The relationship between the psychoanalytic therapist and a patient who is committed to the contemplative life is not always a one-way street. I know of two instances where psychoanalysts, who were seriously involved in their own meditative practices, worked with patients who were spiritually more advanced. In one case, the patient was a Zen master. The analyst, who is involved in one of the other schools of Buddhist meditation, said he learned a great deal from this patient.

To illustrate further the complexity between the contemplative life and psychoanalytic therapy: two Indian women psychoanalytic therapists were each involved in an extremely painful break-up of a long-term love relationship. Both found that being in psychoanalytic therapy did not relieve their anguish. Each, independently, turned to Vipassana Buddhist meditation and found the practice to be most helpful. One of the women continued regularly her practice after she had recovered from the break-up, the other only intermittently.

### **Summary**

This paper first gives the historical background where Freudian psychoanalysis has changed from applied psychoanalysis, which is frequently reductionistic, to clinical observations, where both the psychoanalyst and patient are involved in one or another spiritual practice. It then asserts that even

persons quite advanced in the contemplative life can have significant emotional problems, and gives six brief case examples. The next topic discussed is to what extent meditation or other spiritual practices can cope with deep-seated emotional conflicts, to what extent psychoanalytic therapy can be of assistance, and how the two can fruitfully interact. The last section cites examples where psychoanalysts learned from a more spiritually advanced patient, and where Vipassana meditation helped two women psychoanalytic therapists cope with the break-up of a love affair more than their therapy did.

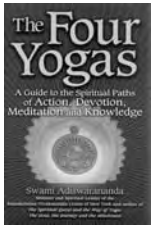


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# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



## **The Four Yogas**

Swami Adiswarananda

SkyLight Paths, Sunset Farm Offices,  
Route 4, PO Box 237, Woodstock,  
Vermont 05091, USA. Website: [www.skylightpaths.com](http://www.skylightpaths.com). 2006. viii + 297 pp.  
\$ 29.99.

**I**t has been an ecstatic experience for me to go through the lucid articulation of yogic spirituality and the judicious analysis of the essentials of practicality that the book under review presents. The Upanishadic truths, which Swami Vivekananda vigorously declared to a global audience, are appearing in more contemporary and responsive modes in the words of Swami Adiswarananda. The systematic exposition of the central issues—the nature and efficacy of different paths in leading to the goal of Self-realization, and a series of dispassionate analyses of allied concepts—give the work the feel of a scientific treatise written in an exceptionally methodical and objective manner.

‘The purpose of this guidebook’, says the learned author, ‘is to introduce the reader to each one of these paths [of yoga] and to its corresponding message, philosophy, psychology and practices, and also to the obstacles that may stand in the way’ (1). But this is more than just a guidebook. In addition to the technical details involved therein, it contains an exhaustive discussion of the psycho-philosophical reasons why a particular path or even a combination of different paths is worth following.

The purported objective of the different yogic paths is one. But the multiplicity of paths presupposes a variety of human dispositions. ‘Each seeker is called upon to decide which yoga best corresponds to his or her natural disposition’ (5). Interspersing his narrative with citations from the wonderful works of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Nikhilananda, the author elucidates the concepts and practices of the four yogic paths—karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga, and jnana yoga—in four erudite sections.

The last chapter of each of these sections has a

pragmatic discussion of the obstacles that beset the practitioner in these paths. Although Swami Adiswarananda has followed Swami Vivekananda (and Patanjali), the analyses of these obstacles and the appropriate remedies reveal the author’s open-mindedness, originality of thought, and personal experience. For instance, the author considers dogmatism the strongest obstacle in the path of bhakti yoga. It ‘leads to narrow-mindedness, sectarianism, and bigotry. Impelled by dogmatism, a seeker often becomes too concerned with literally adhering to every word of the scriptures, instead of taking the essence of the sacred texts and proceeding on the path’ (138). Similarly, only an adept in meditation can practise karma-yoga, because ‘selfless action is attaching the entire mind to one’s duties, while meditation is detaching the same mind from the results of duty’ (72).

The last section is unique in its exploration of the nature and need of harmony of the yogas. Although each yoga, as the author admits, is an independent path to approach the Divine, there are occasions when all the four paths overlap and interconnect: ‘When any one of the four yogas leads the way, the other three remain in the background ... to support the leader’ (264). Moreover, ‘practice of a harmonious combination of the four yogas is important because of the pitfalls and dangers on the way’ (264). Swami Vivekananda once compared the harmony of the yogas to the combined utility of the two wings and tail in the flight of a bird. The Sankhya theory of the varied, yet integral, presence of the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *thamas*—in every human being also supports the case for harmony.

Every creation reflects some of the characteristics and vision of its creator. Likewise, the spiritually inspiring qualities of the book under review, as a whole, indicate that blend of philosophically-enlightened mind and religiously-committed soul that the author possesses. Many of the thoughts and analytical judgements in the book could only have been expressed by a sadhaka and scholar of high level. Despite the profundity of thought and the many mystico-philosophical issues involved therein, the text

is marked by a rare clarity, simplicity, and lucidity in its language and style. The book is, without doubt, superbly designed to fulfill its objective.

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Reader, Department of Philosophy  
Rani Durgawati University, Jabalpur



***In Search Of Spiritual Values***  
Swami Prabhananda

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of  
Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029.  
E-mail: [rmic@vsnl.com](mailto:rmic@vsnl.com). 2004. 136 pp.  
Rs 50.

Swami Prabhananda needs no introduction. His painstakingly meticulous and thoroughly researched books on Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi have added several new dimensions to the fascinating study of their epoch-making lives. These books highlight areas which enrich, in remarkable ways, our scholarly as well as devotional sensibilities.

Here is another aspect of the swami's versatility. In the short span of a hundred and thirty-six pages, he explores the various facets of the perennial quest for spiritual values. The lucid preface sets the tone of the book: 'Even when millions of people live in poverty and squalor, others have attained an unprecedented level of material well-being—yet they are not happy. If people are essentially Spirit, why is there this disparity? Why are people not equally happy? Why are people perennially haunted by questions like, what is the meaning of my life?'

The short chapters—both diagnostic and remedial—are arranged in four sections: 'In Search of Values', 'Religion in Practice', 'In Quest of God', and 'God in Our Life'. In each of these we find a provocative counterposition of perennial truths and present-day paradoxes. The pervasive quest for sensate happiness has spawned, in the swami's words, 'the new industry of happiography'. This caters to the *rajasic* and *tamasic* layers of the psyche.

How do we, then, regain our spiritual heritage and actualize our divine potential? This cannot be done, says the swami, by 'causal interest or intellectual assent'. It demands strong determination to 'live in the Spirit, breathe the Spirit and commune with the Spirit'. Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda show the way: 'They saw the divine spark in all' and did not 'emphasize the dark side'.

The spirit of this gospel of love runs through the

book and enlivens every page. The astounding implications of Sri Ramakrishna's direct experience of the truth that underlies all faiths has, as the swami says, 'opened a new chapter in the book of religion'. The culmination of our search for spiritual values lies in opening our hearts to the pages of this book.

*In Search of Spiritual Values* is, thus, an illuminating map of the spiritual life that embraces the totality of spiritual consciousness transcending all specificities in its sweep and range. That makes for the immediacy and relevance of this elegantly produced book.

*Dr M Sivaramkrishna*

Former Head, Department of English  
Osmania University, Hyderabad



***Insights into the Bhagavad Gita***

Vimala Thakar

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow  
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007.  
E-mail: [mlbd@vsnl.com](mailto:mlbd@vsnl.com). 2005. 374 pp.  
Rs 495.

We, as Hindus, venerate the Bhagavadgita. It contains the essence of the Vedas and the Upanishads and is the epitome of the Hindu teachings. Translated into numerous languages, it continues to sustain the spiritual quest of innumerable minds, irrespective of religious affiliation.

*Insights into the Bhagavad Gita* is a collection of Vimala Thakar's talks given in the West before an inquisitive audience. Anita Sterner, the editor, has taken great care to preserve the original flavour of these lectures. The material is organized in twelve elaborate chapters highlighting the various yogas that are the essence of the divine dialogue.

Vimalaji's long association with Acharya Vinoba Bhave and J Krishnamurti helped in shaping her understanding of the essence of the Gita. More importantly, her personal contemplation on the Gita has turned this volume into a precious gift for spiritually-inclined readers.

In describing Arjuna's despondency, the author draws our attention to the optimistic philosophy of the Vedas and the views of Acharya Shankara, Mahatma Gandhi, and Vinoba Bhave. Gandhiji had characterized the Gita way as the 'yoga of non-attachment'. To Vinoba, Gita is 'Brahma-Vidya Yoga': 'Realize your own nature, Brahma Vidya, know and realize you are Brahman and then, with the aware-

ness of your own nature, plunge into the battle of relationships' (13).

In 'Yoga of Knowledge of Reality', the author elucidates Sri Krishna's teachings on how to be aware of the real while living with the unreal. She draws our attention to the age-old Socratic teaching, 'know thyself', which Browning echoed when he said, 'The light of truth is within you.' Krishna tells Arjuna, 'You are perplexed and embarrassed because you have forgotten the nature of reality within you and around you.' Here the author cautions us not to confuse 'Sankhya Yoga' with the Sankhya philosophy. Sankhya Yoga means the path of knowledge, the path of reason. Again, the yoga that Sri Krishna teaches is not the one associated with the name of Patanjali. That needs the observance of specific psychophysical disciplines. The Gita is propounding something different, though the fundamentals of both paths—satya, ahimsa, and the like—are the same (24). The Gita teaches us how not to lose our inner freedom. It teaches us how to remain 'whole' in the midst of various relationships. The beauty of human life lies in the opportunity to relate to many levels and to many fields at the same time, much like in an orchestra (25).

The author refers to the recent scientific writings of Fritjof Capra and David Bohm and states that truth remains the same, whether the Gita talks about it or the physicist do (22).

About the exalted state of *sthitaprajna*, Vimalaji says, 'To be able to relate to the world through perception and cognition, to relate to it through responses if and when necessary and to relate to the unmanifest essence through awareness, all this is so greatly fulfilling. Such a person feels wholeness. Fulfilment enriches the sense of wholeness within you. ... A *yogi* is always fulfilled in being alive. The sense of being alive, the vibrations of the vitality, of intelligence within, confers upon him such an ecstasy, that he does not move towards the outer world with a begging bowl for seeking pleasure' (59–60).

There are certain actions which we cannot abandon, as their performance is a bounden duty. 'If you are married and you are raising a family,' Vimalaji points out, 'then functioning as a wife, a husband, a father, a mother, helping the children to grow, is your spiritual *sadhana*. Those actions (*vihita karma*) are not a bondage; those actions, which are inevitable, are the means to your liberation' (182).

The core of the Gita's message is covered in the first twelve chapters. The remaining chapters only

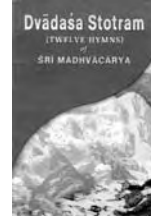
add to this basic core. Vimalaji has dwelt on these first twelve chapters in this volume, providing enough scope for a study and learning that can leave one spiritually transformed.

If the readers achieve this transformation, Vimalaji is sure to consider her purpose fulfilled. There can be no happiness beyond this fulfilment.

Every serious reader will value this book.

Dr N B Patil

Honorary Director, Dr P V Kane Institute for  
Postgraduate Studies and Research  
Asiatic Society, Mumbai



### ***Dvādaśa Stotram of Śrī Madhvācārya***

Trans. Kowlagi Seshachar

Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai  
600 004. 2005. E-mail: [srkmath@vsnl.com](mailto:srkmath@vsnl.com). xxii + 88 pp. Rs 20.

**D***dvādaśa Stotra* is the most popular of the Sanskrit works authored by Sri Madhvacharya. The revered acharya, the exponent of Dvaita Vedanta, has sung the glory of Bhagavan Hari in these twelve hymns, which are characterized by outstanding poetic charm and exquisite devotional sentiment.

According to Sri Madhva, the purport of all the Vedas is to proclaim the glories of Bhagavan Vishnu. Hence, one should meditate on the ever-blissful form of the Lord, which frees one from defilement of mind and body. The Lord is the sanctuary of his devotees and fulfiller of their aspirations.

In these hymns, Sri Madhva invokes and propitiates Hari, singing the glory of his various forms and incarnations. He also extols the highly auspicious and infinite excellences of the Lord and concludes with a fervent prayer to the Lord to make the devotee worthy of the knowledge of his greatness.

Sri Kowlagi Seshachar, a retired Sanskrit professor, has faithfully rendered these beautiful hymns into simple English. A scholarly introduction by Sri S S Raghavachar, the original text in Devanagari, and an English transliteration add to the value of the book.

Sri Madhvacharya gives his message in the following: 'With your mind absorbed in all humility at the feet of Hari, always do your duty, worthy of your station, uninterruptedly and enjoy its ordained fruits according to your capacity. ... Hari alone is the father, mother, and refuge of the universe.'

This book is bound to be an effective medium for

the dissemination of Madhvacharya's message of devotional service.

Swami Vireshananda

Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore



### **Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga**

Giuseppe Baroetto

D K Printworld, 'Sri Kunj', F-52, Bali Nagar, New Delhi 110 015. 2005. E-mail: [dkprintworld@vsnl.net](mailto:dkprintworld@vsnl.net). 186 pp. Rs 350.

Vajrayana, popularly called Tantric Buddhism, is the esoteric aspect of the Buddhist religion. It is generally believed that Vajrayana is a later or degenerate aspect of the great Dharma taught by Bhagavan Gautama Buddha. Some of the modern scholars, including the renowned Rahul Sankirtayan, hold that the degeneration of the great religion into Tantric rituals and associated practices brought about the decline and ultimate downfall of Buddhism in India. The followers of Vajrayana, however, firmly believe that the said esoterism is no new development, rather it is ingrained in and inherited from the parent Mahayana. They also hold that Vajrayana does not rest simply and exclusively on certain rituals and the worship of numerous Tantric Buddhist deities, but actually teaches spiritual truths and practices of a very high level. One will be convinced of their views if one goes deep into the Mahayana canonical texts, such as *Saddharmapundarika Sutra*, *Guhyasamaja*, and *Manjusrimulakalpa*.

The misconceptions about Vajrayana have some practical and historical causes. Vajrayana has been prevalent in the Nepalese and Tibetan traditions since the twelfth century (though it probably entered there several centuries earlier). While the Nepalese tradition remained content with the ritualistic aspect, the Tibetan tradition, besides developing elaborate rituals for beginners and the laity, kept alive the high spiritual aspect. This esoteric spiritual aspect was almost unknown to the outside world due to a double inaccessibility—inaccessibility of the land of Tibet and inaccessibility of the texts, written in classical Tibetan, which enshrined these teachings. Till the fifties of the last century, Tibetan studies had been limited to matters of academic and linguistic interest. But after His Holiness the Dalai Lama, along with other learned and spiritually adept lamas, migrated from Tibet and settled in India, new vistas of understanding opened up. The reoriented Tibet-

an spiritual tradition has attracted votaries not only from India, but also from Western countries. These new votaries are not mere academics, they are spiritual adepts too. Their experiences and attainments have found expression in their writings. The book under review falls in this genre.

The author has received instructions on Mahamudra and Atiyoga from two realized lamas. His knowledge of the Tibetan language is exceptional. The book is the outcome of study, research, and experience in the relevant texts.

Mahamudra (Great Seal) and Atiyoga (Extreme Union) are two esoteric teachings of Buddhist spirituality which, 'although differentiated by distinct historical lineages, meet in the same radical essentiality where human beings, transcending their dividing attitudes, find themselves truly free in the single reality that has always unified them all'.

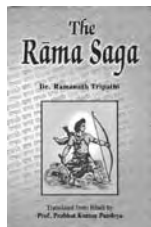
As regards the distinct lineages, the teachings of Atiyoga come from Tilopa (928–1009 CE), the celebrated Indian mystic and preceptor of the great master Naropa (956–1040 CE). The teachings of Atiyoga come from the great Buddhist guru Padmasambhava, who is believed to have hailed from the ancient Indian kingdom of Uddiyana, and who introduced the esoteric Tantric teachings into Tibet. He flourished in the eighth century.

The book comprises lucid and faithful translations of three texts—*Phyag rgya chen po'i man ngag* and *Do ha mdzod ces bya ba* by Tilopa, and *Rig pa ngo sprod gcer mthong rang grol* by Padmasambhava. All these Tibetan texts are translations from no-longer-extant Sanskrit works. The author has appended a roman transliteration of the texts to help the reader check the authenticity of the translations. The texts have been reviewed critically, and variant readings in different sources have been indicated. This makes the work academically valuable. However, the importance of the book does not lie in the text and translation alone, but more in the commentary based on the oral instructions the author received from the lamas Lhundrup Tenzin in Nepal and Rangdröl Naljor in Delhi. These instructions have ensured that the commentary is traditional, authoritative, and illuminating.

Scholars and students interested in the esoteric teachings of the ancient Buddhist masters will find the book interesting as well as useful.

Dr Satkari Mukhopadhyaya

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Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi



## **The Rāma Saga**

Dr Ramanath Tripathi; trans.  
Prof. Prabhat Kumar Pandeya

Akshaya Prakashan, 208, M G House, 2  
Community Centre, Wazirpur Industrial  
Area, Delhi 110 052. E-mail: [harish@](mailto:harish@busyinfotech.com)  
[busyinfotech.com](mailto:busyinfotech.com). 2005. xvi + 274 pp.  
Rs 450.

**T**he *Rāma Saga* is the English translation of a Hindi novel, *Ramagatha*, based on the story of the great Rama, the hero of Valmiki's celebrated epic Ramayana. Rama, as depicted by the author, is very much a human being and not a god; 'if pricked he will bleed like us'. Following the advice of the Roman poet and critic Horace in his *Ars Poetica* about adaptation of characters from ancient classics, Tripathi has depicted Rama much as he has been depicted by Valmiki. He has taken few liberties with the essential character of the ancient protagonist. There are variations, but these are on minor points; and this is perhaps how it should be.

As the author has rightly pointed out in his preface, 'The saga of Rāma is enthroned in the heart of Indians. It finds place everywhere from the mansions to huts, the rich and the poor; none is unfamiliar with it.' A large number of works in Indian languages have been written throughout the centuries with the story of the national hero Rama as their main theme. Though a few writers, including the Bengali epic poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt, openly violated the Horatian directive, most authors have remained faithful to the original narrative. The most celebrated and influential of these works is the Hindi *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas. Tripathi has taken his courage in both hands to write a new book on Rama, and his is a successful venture.

The author is a Ramayana scholar who is well acquainted with the Rama saga in different Indian as well as foreign languages. So his novel has been rightly described as a 'thesis-novel' or 'dissertation-novel'. But in no way does this affect the fictional excellence of the work, which has a realistic and well-knit plot and good characterization.

The story of Rama has not been modernized here in any way; nor has any deliberate attempt been made to discover any modern relevance in the old story. The author has placed Rama in his own time and has looked at him as if he were his contemporary. Folksongs and other devices have been employed to bring out the 'local colour'.

There are many events in Valmiki's epic which seem incredible, says the author. These include Sita's origin from the soil, the Ahalya episode, the death of Vali, Rama's punishing the ocean, the ten heads of Ravana, the characters flying in the sky, Sita's test by fire (*agni pariksha*), her entry into the nether world, and the slaying of Shambuka. He has attempted to present these events in a logically convincing manner.

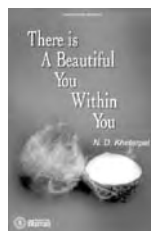
Tripathi also lists four chief inspirations that he has derived from the story of Rama and which he has conveyed to the readers: (i) living a life of sacrifice, full of love for family, society, nation, and ultimately all of humanity; (ii) leading a virtuous and moral life; (iii) feeling a sense of kinship with the afflicted and neglected; and (iv) fighting fearlessly against oppressive forces.

Professor Prabhat Kumar Pandeya has done a commendable job in providing a readable translation. Some typographical points could however be made: Rama and Sita are too well known globally to need diacritical marks (certainly not after the first mention). Also, when diacritical marks have been used throughout the text, why make an exception in the case of *ī*? *Seetā*, instead of *Sītā*, is an eyesore. Several Indian words like *ālatā* and *siddhi* have been left untranslated, and Hindi terms like *bhaiyā* (brother), *devara* (brother-in-law), and *bhābhee* (sister-in-law) have been unnecessarily used. A large number of italicized words on most pages also has a disconcerting effect on the reader.

In conclusion, we may do well to recall Brahma's prophecy about the story of Rama: 'As long as the earth lasts, and rivers go on flowing / May the story of Rama spread far and wide.'

*Dr Visvanath Chatterjee*

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Jadavpur University, Kolkata



## **There is A Beautiful You Within You**

N D Khetarpal

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati  
Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400 007. E-mail: [brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in](mailto:brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in). 2004.  
xviii + 166 pp. Rs 160.

**T**his book discusses how one can lead a life of happiness and peace in today's competitive and stressful world. Happiness, to the author, is of two types: superficial and satisfying. Superficial happi-

ness is temporary, based on worldly things, while satisfying happiness is self-elevating and permanent. It is an inner attitude of looking for good everywhere. To be happy one has to accept change with grace. Change is inevitable, but most of the time we are afraid of change. We constantly think either of the past or of the future. Thoughts of the past may make us melancholy, while thoughts of the future may create fear. Khetarpal suggests that the best way to be happy is to live in the present, liking *this* moment. He discusses in great detail the ways to be happy. Self-confidence, faith in God, having one goal at a time, imbibing happy behaviour patterns—taking interest in others, developing team-spirit, keeping a smile, and the like—are all very necessary for a happy life. But most of all, one has to find out the secret of inner happiness. Love for one's fellow beings, prayer, and meditation contribute to this inner happiness.

The author also discusses ways to avoid unhappiness, the reasons for which may be either mental or physical. And finally, he suggests the key to overcoming unhappiness: there is something beautiful within everybody, and it is everyone's duty to be aware of that and bring it out. The simplicity and clarity of Khetarpal's thought are certainly suggestive of that inner beauty that shows us the way to happiness.

Dr Krishna Verma

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**Encountering Kali: In the  
Margins, at The Center,  
In The West.**

Ed. Rachel Fell McDermott and  
Jeffrey J Kripal

Motilal Banarsidass. 2005. xvii + 320 pp.  
Rs 250.

The editors say that their book—an anthology of essays—seeks to address some 'broad cultural issues by focusing on the complexities, promises, and problems involved in meeting and interpreting a specific Hindu deity, the goddess Kālī, both in her indigenous South Asian settings and in her more recent Western reincarnations.'

Kripal is an old, somewhat brazen hand at this game of analysing Tantric ethos in general, and Kali and Sri Ramakrishna in particular. His favourite hobby horse (on which he has spent and continues to expend lots of his, alas, tragically misdirected energy) is 'secret' in any form. And the secret is invariably

erotic, often sordid, scarcely defensible psychic aberration. In its train come the done-to-death themes of mother fixation, adult regression, displacement, and what have you! All of them impeccably argued—of course by ignoring alternative, highly sophisticated, indigenous frames. On display are the characteristic Western (specially American) set of psychic compulsions. Professor Aizaz Ahmed calls them 'an old set of schizophrenias', an 'overwhelming fear psychosis ... and the sheer arrogance of power'.

In the academic studies on Tantra, if the volume is any indication, most of the contributors have exercised this power to 'beat the centre' of their studies—Kali—only to produce marginal pulp. That Rachel Fell McDermott—whose earlier volume *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal* showed a refreshing (and to me, surprising) sensitivity to its subject—should lend herself to be a co-editor here reveals the ineradicable compulsions of Western academics. Invariably, scant attention, let alone validity, is granted to the traditions which the studies claim to examine. Added to this are the organized forums for diffusing these so-called original studies which can hardly be discussed in any comparable way by people on the other side. The marketing makes all the difference. If you do it with all the aggression behind global distribution, you can say anything you want and get away with it.

The editors' claims rest on two sets of essays. Part I focuses on 'Kali in the Texts and Contexts of South Asia'. Beginning with David Kinsley's characteristically balanced essay 'Kālī', this part presents 'Kali the Terrible and her Tests' (David Fold), 'The Domestication of a Goddess' (Sanjukta Gupta), 'Dominating Kali: Hindu Family Values and Tantric Power' (Usha Menon and Robert A Shweder), 'Kali in a Context of Terror' with special focus on Sri Lanka's Civil War (Patricia Lawrence), and 'Kali Mayi: Myth and Reality in a Banaras Ghetto' (Roxanne Kamayani Gupta).

Part II is devoted to 'Kali in Western Settings, Western Discourses', and contains six essays. The authors explore 'South Asian and British Constructions' (Cynthia Ann Holmes), 'India's Darkest Heart: Kali in the Colonial Imagination' (Hugh B Urban, who seems to have been initiated into if not infected by Jeffrey Kripal's quest for sex and secrecy, to judge by his *The Economic Ecstasy*), 'Why the Tantric is a Hero' (by—who else—Jeffrey Kripal), 'Mother in Contemporary Trinidad' (Keith M McNeal), 'Margins at the Center: Tracing Kali through Time, Space and Culture' (Sarah Caldwell), and 'Kali's New Fron-



tiers: a Hindu Goddess on the Internet' (Rachel F McDermott).

Very rich fare indeed; too many things thrown in with a nonchalance and abundance difficult to buckle within the narrow frame of a review. For instance, Hugh Urban's essay on Kali in the colonial imagination seems to break new ground by claiming that Mother Kali represents 'a crystallized fusion of ancient history and contemporary political present: she lies at the nexus of a complex play of mimesis, imagining, and counter-imagining between colonizer and colonized in nineteenth and twentieth century India.' Thus 'if she could be imagined by her British viewers as the darkest, most savage heart of India, she could also be seized upon by her devotees as the most powerful and threatening image of India in revolt.' While this is a shrewd juxtaposition, I do not see why Urban quotes from Katherine Mayo, Fletcher McMunn, and such other writers to highlight the facile images of the feminine (that is, 'effeminate') and the masculine to suggest the colonial imagination. Not that a scholar does not have the freedom to choose what texts he wants to buttress an argument with. But should he not choose sensitive texts which present a more balanced view? Even when Urban focuses on the twentieth century, he cites only *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Dream* (which is somewhat 'countered' by passing references to Zimmer, Mircea Eliade, and Jung.) No wonder Sir John Woodroffe—whose pioneering studies literally brought Tantra to centre stage—is hardly taken into account. The reason: 'his books are difficult waters to chart because of their textual detail, inadequate referencing, and total lack of indices. Moreover, his work is marked by several cultural, moral, and philosophical biases that still color and in many ways restrict academic discourses on the Goddess to this day.' That is the crux of the background to *this* text. If the text does not have a scholarly apparatus such as referencing or has philosophical biases it is not reliable.

One cannot object to that. But with the abundant availability of all these now, can one not go beyond evoking merely impressionistic images of Kali? 'Impressionistic', I say, for want of a better word. Look at a sample which sounds scholarly and detached, and yet indulges one's fantasies: Roxanne Kamayani Gupta experiences Kali as 'the perfect opposite, the perfect complement, the perfect white reflection of Her Royal Blackness, She, My Nemesis, My Mirror, My Shadow.' And what does her Kali Ma say? With 'a wicked little smile' she tells the author (apparently

bowed down if not bent by marital woes): 'Honey, I've seen it all. Why do you think I never married? And one more thing I'm no Mother Theresa.' And the recipient of this great insight from Ma 'burst out into hysterical laughter.' Naturally, for hysteria is the predictable preamble for most seekers in the West to think of Kali. No wonder Freud cautioned Western seekers and students of Indic texts and their insights against falling headlong into, in this case, the pit of delusion which, I suppose, Kali Ma specially prepares for such seekers. Bluntly, Freud asked: 'What do these European would-be mystics know about the profundity of the East? They rave on but they know nothing. And then they are surprised when they lose their heads and are not infrequently driven mad by it—literally driven out of their minds. ... The most sensible thing to do is to keep on asking questions. At the moment you are interested in the Hindu philosophers. They went so far as express their answers in the form of questions. They knew why.'

William P Parsons, who cites this in his groundbreaking study *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford, 1999, 48–9), identifies the reason behind aberrant readings of Indic psychological-mystical frames and suggests: 'With respect to the utilization of psychoanalytic models it is one thing, as has been attempted in the studies of Meissner, Rubin, Engels, Kakar, and Kripal to allow space for pathological, adaptive, and even transformed elements in mysticism. It is quite another to reduce all mysticism to pathology. By undercutting the legitimacy of extraordinary mystical modes of knowing, devaluing the ethnographic activity and the task of thick description, classical theorists like [Narsingha] Sil and Masson find the subjectivity of men like Ramakrishna and the Buddha all too easy to understand and, once understood, easy to dismiss (op cit., 128).

The unfortunate thing is: if it is easy to dismiss, it is easier to distort. A case in point is Rachel McDermott's 'interesting' piece on 'Kali on Internet'. Kali figures in multiple media and has associations of ferocity, passion, and danger. She is 'Kālī the vampire, Kālī the inspiration behind a group of airline stewardesses who strangle their passengers like the Thugs, and Kālī the patron of lesbian terrorists.' In short, the Internet sites that McDermott presents perceive Kali as an antidote to 'male violence and supremacy'. And to top it all is the image of a young woman called Kali holding a skull at her throat!

Am I denigrating the impeccable scholarship

and insights in the book? Far from it; and I know that every point I raise (if I succeed in raising any, of course) can be controverted. I can only wonder why such intuitive analysts, at home in their respective disciplines, approach the field from not too palatable points of entry. But this, I suppose, is the current trend. Tantric studies coming from the West are, by and large, seething cauldrons of self-reflexive erotic fantasies hoisted upon deities like Kali. After all, the Freudian libertarian effort has thrown open no-holds-barred licentious corridors in which aberrant academics and practitioners can freely roam—with insensitivity and impertinence—and find indiscriminately chosen ‘Eastern’ deities and motifs as pegs to hang their favorite themes on.

*Postscript:* If I felt a bit disturbed, I took consolation from Sri Ramakrishna. Like Kali speaking to Roxanne, I fancied that the Great Master spoke to me: ‘Why are you worried, Sivaram! Did I not sing that song and tell the truth long ago? You seem to have forgotten.’ And then I remembered:

Who is there who can understand what Mother Kali is? / Even the six darshanas are powerless to reveal Her. / ... / When man aspires to understand Her, Ramprasad must smile. / To think of knowing Her, he says, is quite as laughable / As to imagine one can swim across the boundless sea. / But while my mind has understood, alas! my heart has not; / Though but a dwarf, it still would strive to make a captive of the moon.

Dr M Sivaramkrishna



***The Book on Happiness and  
The Book on Life Beyond***

Bô Yin Râ, trans. B A  
Reichenbach

Sterling Publishers, A-59 Okhla Industrial  
Area, Phase II, New Delhi 110 020. E-  
mail: [sterlingpublishers@touchtelindia.net](mailto:sterlingpublishers@touchtelindia.net).  
2006. 127 and 160 pp. Rs 90 and 150.

Bô Yin Râ is the spiritual name of Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken, German painter, philosopher, and mystic. He was born in Aschaffenburg, Germany, in 1876, and died in Switzerland in 1943. Nearly 200 of his luminous, enigmatic paintings are extant. He authored forty books; the two books under review are part of his 32-work *Hortus Conclusis* (*The Enclosed Garden*) series, and were completed in 1920 and 1929 respectively.

Bô Yin Râ's thought is influenced by things In-

dian, no doubt, but he charts his own path into the realm of the infinite. His insightful, direct, and often poetic language lead one to feel that he speaks from more than an intellectual conviction of the spiritual world: he must have been a genuine mystic. Indeed, he has said: ‘Every word found in my books is based upon objective personal experience.’ Again, he describes himself as ‘only a mediator conveying spiritual insights into the eternal home of man’. And he advises seekers: ‘You should not “believe” in theories and speculative world views just because some other people take such notions for the truth; for never shall your soul experience lasting peace until you found yourself again: as the eternal self-expression of what is absolute Reality.’

In *The Book on Happiness*, the author tells us how to be happy: ‘All happiness this mortal life affords ... is joy experienced through creative effort.’ In eight chapters, including ‘Creating Happiness as Moral Duty’, ‘Love’, ‘Money’, and ‘Optimism’, he offers specific guidance to the reader about how to live one’s life according to spiritual laws and in order to manifest happiness. He concludes with this encouragement: ‘Trust ... your own good right—indeed, your moral duty—to experience lasting happiness and strive, with firm resolve and confident serenity, truly to create it in your life: so that you, too, may one day find yourself among this planet’s happy guests.’

*The Book on Life Beyond* is the product of a more mature man. Here the inevitability of death, and the preparation for it, are the main subjects. In five chapters, including ‘The Art of Dying’, ‘The Temple of Eternity and the World of Spirit’, and ‘The Only Absolute Reality’, he explains, from his unique viewpoint, the embodied state and the path beyond it. In the course of his pronouncements, he distinguishes between mere physical and genuinely spiritual perceptions; clairvoyance falls into the former category. He cautions against attempting to contact the dead through seance; such contact, if genuine, can only be with physical entities, and can be very dangerous. He concludes: ‘Securely rooted in your present life, you may in confidence look forward to your life “beyond”—this very day assured of your eternal being in the Spirit’s everlasting realm of light.’

Bô Yin Râ is not hampered by the confines of any dogma or church. Indeed, though he may have been born in a church (his parents were devout Roman Catholics), he surely did not die in one; he encourages us to do the same.

PB

# REPORTS

## News from Branch Centres

A statue of Swami Vivekananda was installed on the bank of Ulsoor Lake, Bangalore, through the initiative of **Ramakrishna Math, Ulsoor**, and was unveiled by Sri Kumaraswamy, Chief Minister of Karnataka, on 4 November 2006.

The new Multi-specialty Day Clinic and Diagnostic Centre at **Ramakrishna Mission, Jammu**, was dedicated by Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, on 4 November, and inaugurated by Janab Ghulam Nabi Azad, Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, on 5 November 2006. An X-ray unit, two dental chairs, a pathological laboratory, an eye-clinic, and chambers for medical consultation in general medicine, orthopaedics, and pediatrics have been completed thus far. Swami Atmasthanandaji, the Chief Minister, Lt Gen. (Rtd) S K Sinha, Governor, Jammu and Kashmir, and other dignitaries spoke at the meetings organized on the occasion.

The new high school building at **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Bhubaneswar**, was inaugurated by Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, on 5 November 2006.

The self-employment project at **Ramakrishna Math, Cooch Behar**, which will provide training in food processing, mushroom production, and bee-keeping, was inaugurated on 19 November 2006.

The foundation stone was laid for **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University's** faculty for Integrated Rural Development and Management at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur**, by Swami Smarananandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, on 29 November, 2006.

The road from Berhampore to **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Sargachhi**, has been re-named

*Swami Akhandananda Sarani.*

The **Vedanta Society, Santa Barbara**, a sub-centre of the **Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood**, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of



*Vedanta Temple, Santa Barbara*

its beautiful and highly acclaimed temple on 30 September 2006, at its annual observance of Durga Puja. Built in 1956, the Santa Barbara Vedanta temple was designed by the renowned architect Luth Maria Riggs. The temple has won a number of prestigious architectural awards and continues to be sought out by both architects and students of architecture, who visit the temple during architectural tours. Ms Riggs considered the Santa Barbara Vedanta temple her best work and her most beautiful building. While occasionally mistaken for a Buddhist temple, the temple's design is, in fact, modelled after South Indian temple architecture.

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum**, awarded more than 270 scholarships, totalling more than Rs 5 lakh, to poor but meritorious students in Karnataka. Swami Swahanandaji, Head, **Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood**, presided over distribution of the scholarships at a function on 22 November 2006.

## Relief

**Flood Relief:** In the wake of floods in Andhra



Swami Swahanandaji hands over a scholarship, Belgaum

Pradesh last month, **Ramakrishna Mission, Vijayawada**, distributed 1,000 kg rice, 7,000 kg dal, 1,750 kg tamarind, 645 kg pickles, 350 kg red chillies, 875 kg chilli powder, 175 kg turmeric, 875 kg seasoning items, 1,750 kg salt, 3,500 litres edible oil, 1,442 kg jaggery, 1,440 packets of biscuits, 500 mats, 500 blankets, 500 saris, 500 lungis, 1,000 towels, and 500 buckets to 3,600 flood-affected families of 33 villages in Krishna and Guntur districts.

**Winter Relief:** 8,826 blankets were distributed to poor people affected by the severity of winter by the following centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission: **Ramakrishna Mission, Along**, 700; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Baranagar**, 4,291; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum**, 200; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chapra**, 285; **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar**, 1,000; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Katihar**, 350; **Ramakrishna Math, Puri**, 1,000; **Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, Belur**, 1,000.

Eye patients and hospital staff, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati



**Distress Relief:** The following centres of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission distributed various items to poor and needy persons of nearby areas: **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Baranagar** (827 saris, 419 dhotis, 50 chaddars, 175 lungis, 50 shirts, 50 pants, 50 frocks, 150 bags); **Ramakrishna Math, Cooch Behar** (54 saris and 19 dhotis).

### Free Eye Camps

Free eye camps are regularly conducted by many centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. A cumulative report is given in the table below, covering the period from 1 December 2005 to 30 November 2006. A total of 31,485 patients were treated, and 5,631 free cataract surgeries were performed. PB

Centre	Patients Treated	Surgeries Performed
Asansol	199	49
Baranagar	67	42
Belgaum	530	174
Chandigarh	245	40
Chennai	1,036	65
Garbeta	668	72
Ichapur	13	13
Jamshedpur	170	54
Limbdi	711	126
Lucknow	13,171	1,544
Mayavati	152	42
Medinipur	354	40
Mumbai	1,402	470
Muzaffarpur	1,533	234
Narainpur	332	134
Patna	1,460	54
Porbandar	521	97
Rajahmundry	60	13
Rajkot	665	66
Sargachhi	624	101
Sikra Kulingram	221	63
Silchar	1,509	232
Ulsoor	5,602	1,928
Visakhapatnam	270	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>31,515</b>	<b>5,728</b>